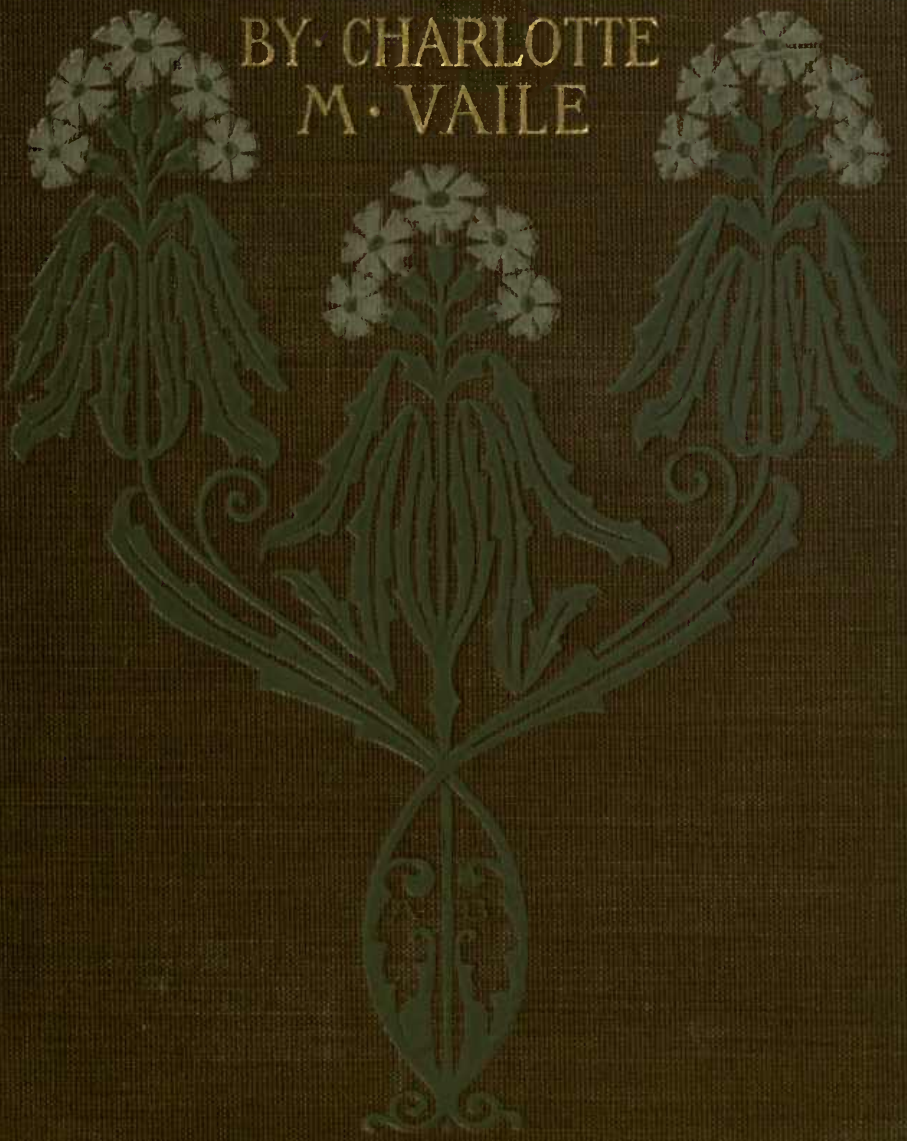
WHEAT AND HUCKLEBERRIES

BY CHARLOTTE M. VAILE



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"MORTON FOUND TIME TO ANSWER ALL HER QUESTIONS."

WHEAT AND HUCKLEBERRIES

OR

DR. NORTHMORE'S DAUGHTERS

BY

CHARLOTTE M. VAILE

ILLUSTRATED BY

ALICE BARBER STEVENS

1899
336

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WHEAT AND HUCKLEBERRIES.

To J. F. V.

This Story

TOO SLIGHT TO BE AN OFFERING TO HIM, BUT WRITTEN

IN DEAR REMEMBRANCE OF HIS EARLY HOME

AND OF MINE

Is Lovingly Dedicated

C. M. V.

2229063

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WHEAT AND HUCKLEBERRIES.

CHAPTER I.

HARVEST AT THE FARM.

JUST how Dr. Philip Northmore came to be the owner of a farm had never been quite clear to his fellow-townsmen. That he had bought it — that pretty stretch of upland five miles from Rushmore — in some settlement with a friend, who owed him more money than he could ever pay, was the open fact, but how the doctor had believed it to be a good investment for himself was the question. The opportunity to pay interest on a mortgage and make improvements on those charming acres at the expense of his modest professional income was the main part of what he got out of it. The doctor, as everybody knew, had no genius for making money.

However, he had never lamented his purchase. On the principle perhaps which makes the child who draws most heavily on parental care the object of dearest

affection, this particular possession seemed to be the one on which the good doctor prided himself most. Its fine location and natural beauty were points on which he grew eloquent, and he sometimes referred to its peaceful cultivation as the employment in which he hoped to spend his own declining years, an expectation which it is safe to say none of his acquaintances shared with him.

So much for Dr. Northmore's interest in the farm. It had a peculiar interest for the feminine part of his household in the early days of July, when wheat harvest had come and the threshing machine was abroad in the land. It was too much to expect of Jake Erlock, the tenant at the farm, who, since his wife's death had lived there alone, that he would provide meals for the score of threshers who would bring the harvesting appetite to the work of the great day. Clearly this fell to the Northmores, and the doctor's wife had risen to the part with her own characteristic energy. But for once, on the very eve of the threshing, she found herself facing a sudden embarrassment. Relatives from a distance had made their unexpected appearance as guests at her house, and to leave them behind, or take them into the crowded doings at the farm, seemed alike impossible. The prompt proposal of her daughters, that they, with the combined wisdom of their seventeen and nineteen

years, should manage the harvest dinner, hardly seemed a plan to be adopted, and would have found scant attention but for the unlooked-for support it received from one of the neighbors.

"Now why don't you let 'em do it?" said Mrs. Elwell, who had happened in at the doctor's an hour after the arrival of the guests. "You've got everything planned out, of course, and there'll be lots of the neighbor women in to help. There always is."

She caught the look of entreaty in the eyes of the girls and the doubt in the eyes of their mother, and added, "Now I think of it, I could go out there myself just as well as not. There isn't anything so very much going on at our house to-morrow, and I'd be right glad to take a hand in it. I'll risk it but what the girls and I can manage."

Manage! There was no question on that score. Mrs. Northmore's eyes grew moist and she opened her lips to speak, but her good friend was before her, her pleasant face at that moment the express image of neighborly kindness. "Now, with all you've done for us, you and the doctor, to make a fuss over a little thing like this!" she said. And Mrs. Northmore, with the grace which can receive as well as render a favor, accepted the offer without a protest.

That was how it happened that Esther and Kate

Northmore went to the harvesting at the farm, in their mother's stead, the next morning. Kate, at least, carried no anxiety, but Esther, as the older, could not lay aside some uneasiness, not so much lest things should go wrong as lest their generous friend might be too much burdened, and the thought of all there was to do lent an unusual gravity to her sensitive face.

It was a perfect July day, with the sky an unbroken blue except for the clouds which floated like golden chaff high in the zenith. The great machine, flaming in crimson against a background of gold, stood among the ripened sheaves, and a score of sunburned men urged the labor which had begun betimes.

Ah, there is no harvest like this of the wheat. It comes when the year is at its flood, and the sun, rejoicing as a strong man to run a race, holds long on his course against the slow-creeping night. What ingathering of the later months, when the days have grown short and chilly, can match it in joy? The one is like the victory that comes in youth, when the success of to-day seems the promise for to-morrow; the other is the reward that comes to the worn and enfeebled man, who whispers in the midst of his gladness: "How slight at best are the gains of life!"

Esther was too young to moralize and too busy with

the very practical work of helping with the dinner to grow poetical over the harvest scene, but the beauty of it did hold her for a minute with a long admiring gaze as she stood by the well, where she had gone for a pitcher of fresh water.

A man in gray jeans had hurried from the edge of the field at sight of her, to lower the buckets hanging from the old-fashioned windlass. She detained him a moment when he had handed her the dripping pitcher.

"We couldn't have had a better day than this, could we?" she said. "And what a good thing it is that you and father decided to put in the wheat! He was speaking of that at breakfast this morning, and he says it was all your doing. There was such a poor crop last year that for his part he was almost afraid to try it again."

The man's face shone with gratified pride. "Well, I reckon the doctor ain't fretting over it much now that I had my way," he said. And then he added modestly: "But I might have missed it. You never can tell how a crop'll come out till you see the grain in the measure."

"Well, we're seeing that to-day," said the girl. "How much will there be?"

"We can't rightly tell till it's all threshed out," said the man; "but Tom Balcom 'lows it'll average

as well's anything they've threshed, and they've had thirty-five bushels to the acre."

Figures did not mean much to Esther, but her "Oh!" had a note of appreciation. Then, as he was turning away, she said earnestly: "I hope we shall have a good dinner for you, Mr. Erlock. Mother was ever so sorry she couldn't come out to-day herself; I believe she was afraid you wouldn't fare as well as you ought without her. But Mrs. Elwell came, and between us all we won't let you suffer."

"I hain't a bit o' doubt about the victuals being good," said the man, gallantly. "I hope you found things all right in the house. I tried to red up a little for you."

"Oh, everything was in beautiful order, and the women are all praising your good housekeeping," said Esther, smiling.

He looked at once pleased and embarrassed. "I did the best I could," he said, then turned with an awkward nod and hurried again to his work.

She remembered hers too, and hastened with her pitcher back to the house. It was a one-story frame, with gray shingled sides and a deep drooping roof whose forward projection formed a porch across the entire front. Ordinarily it wore an expression of shy

reserve, but to-day, with doors and windows open, and the hum of voices sounding through and round it, it seemed to have taken a new interest in life and looked a willing part of the cheerful scene.

The kitchen which the girl entered was full of country women, so full indeed that it seemed a wonder they could accomplish any work, but every one was busy except a young woman with a baby in her arms, who sat complacently watching the labors of the others.

It is the neighborly fashion in the middle West for the women of adjoining farms to help each other in the labors of this busiest time in the year, and the custom had not been omitted to-day because there was no one to return the service. It was rendered willingly as ever, partly from regard for Dr. Northmore, and partly from sympathy with the lonely householder who managed his farm.

"I had to stop and talk a minute with Jake Erlock," said Esther, apologetic for her slight loitering now that she felt the hurry of the work again. "He came up to draw the water for me, and you ought to have seen him blush when I told him you all thought he was a good housekeeper."

"Well, if he has any doubt what we think on that point, he'd better come in here and we'll tell him,"

said a woman who was grinding coffee at a mill fixed to the wall. "I don't believe there's another man in this township that would manage as well as he does. I wouldn't answer for the way things would look at our house if 'twas *my* man that had the running of 'em."

Groans and headshakings followed this remark. Apparently none of the women present felt any confidence in the ability of their respective men to run the domestic machinery.

"Well, Mis' Erlock was a mighty good housekeeper herself," observed one of them. "And I reckon Jake thinks it wouldn't be showing proper respect to her memory to let everything go at loose ends now she's gone. I tell you, Jake's an uncommon good man in more ways than one. 'Tain't everybody that would stay single as long as he has, but that's just what I expected from the feelings he showed at the funeral, and it coming so long afterward too."

A murmur of assent showed that the speaker was not the only one who remembered the emotion of the bereaved man on that mournful occasion, which, as had been suggested, occurred some time after his wife's death, the delay of the sermon devoted to her memory being occasioned, as often happens in country districts

of the West and South, by the absence of the preacher proper, whose extended circuit gives him but a portion of the year in one place.

"Well, 'twas to his credit, of course," observed an elderly woman who was shelling peas; "but I must say I don't like this way of putting off the funeral so long. I think burying people and preaching about 'em ought to go together, and if you can't have your own preacher, you'd better put up with somebody else, or go without."

"I don't know about that," said the young woman with the baby. "It looks to me as if folks were in a mighty hurry to get the last word said when they can't wait for the right one to say it. I shouldn't want my husband to be so keen to get through with it all, if 'twas me that was taken."

"Maybe you'd want him to do like the man that took his second wife to hear his first wife's funeral," retorted the other.

The defender of local custom admitted, in the midst of a general laugh, that this was carrying it too far, and then the conversation turned on the probability of Jake Erlock's marrying again, the various suitable persons to be found should he feel so inclined, and the importance in general of men having some one to take care of them, and of women having men and their houses to take care of.

The subject which, with its ramifications, seemed fairly inexhaustible was making Kate Northmore yawn and had fairly driven Esther from the room, when a young man with a bright, sunburned face and a pair of straight, broad shoulders looked in at the window.

"My, how good it smells in here!" he exclaimed in a voice that went well with the face. "What all are we going to have for dinner, Aunt Jenny?"

Mrs. Elwell, who was testing the heat of the oven on a plump bare arm, turned a flushed face and motherly smile on the speaker.

"Everything nice," she said. "You never saw a better dinner than the girls have brought out for you. What do you say to fried chicken, and new potatoes, and green peas, with pie and doughnuts to top off, and lots of other good things thrown in extra?"

The young man smacked his lips and sent a devouring glance around the room. "Say!" he repeated. "Why, I say it's enough to make a fellow feel like John Ridd and thank the Lord for the room there is in him. When are you going to give us a chance at all that?"

"When the bell rings, of course," said Kate Northmore, looking up at him with a saucy glance from the meal she was sifting. "You didn't expect to get anything to eat now, I hope."

"Oh, not anything much," said the young man, help-

ing himself to a doughnut from a plate which stood within easy reach. "I just looked in to tell you that while you're getting, you'd better get us a plenty. We're a fearful hungry crowd, and there won't be much left over; but if there should be, it might come in handy to-morrow."

"*To-morrow!*" repeated Kate, letting the meal which was whirling under her hand fall level in the pan. "You don't mean that there's any danger of your being here to-morrow, do you?"

The young man brushed the chaff from the shoulders of his blue flannel shirt, and set his straw hat a little further on the back of his head before he answered. Kate's "*To-morrow*" had put a complete pause on the talk of the room, and every woman there was looking at him anxiously.

"Well, I wouldn't really say that there's any need of worrying about it *yet*," he said, lowering his voice to a confidential tone; "but you see the men have heard that you and Esther are such stunning good cooks that — well, of course, I don't want to give 'em away, but I don't know as you can blame 'em any for wanting to make the work hold out so as to get in an extra meal or two here, if they can. That's all."

There was a shout at this, and Mrs. Elwell said reproachfully, "Now, Morton, quit your fooling. Aren't

you ashamed of yourself to come scaring the girls with your talk about to-morrow? Why, we thought the machine had broken down, or something of that sort."

He did look a little conscience-smitten just then, as Esther, who had caught some hint of excitement in the dining room, where she was setting the table, appeared in the doorway, looking really troubled. Kate was facing him with a different expression.

"Well, since you're so anxious about to-morrow, Mort Elwell, you needn't eat any more of those doughnuts," she said, snatching up the plate toward which his hand was moving a second time, and setting it out of his reach. "We may want them, you know."

He drew down his face to an injured expression. "That's the way you treat a body, is it, when he comes to give you a friendly warning? All right, I'll go now. I see I'm not wanted."

He shifted his position as he spoke, and the next moment the pitchfork, on which he had been leaning, was thrust through the window, and as quickly withdrawn, with a doughnut sticking on every point. "Good-by, Kate," he shouted, as he disappeared. "If the doughnuts don't hold out, you can make some cookies for to-morrow."

He had the best of it, and after a moment, apparently, even Kate forgave him, "the rascal," as she called

him, with a toss of her pretty head. And then the talk of the kitchen took a new turn, suggested by the thought of all the ills which would have followed if an accident had really happened to the machine. There had been such accidents in the experience of most of those present, and they were recounted now with much fulness of detail and some rivalry as to the amount of agony endured in the several cases by the workers in the culinary department.

"It's the worst thing there is about threshing," said the woman who had related the most harrowing tale of all. "I don't care how many men there are, and I don't mind cooking for 'em, and setting out the best I've got, — seems as if a body warn't thankful for the crop if they don't, — but when the machine gets out of order, and the work hangs on, and you have the men on your hands for three or four days running, just eating you out of house and home, and keeping you on the jump from morning to night, getting things on the table and off again, I tell you it's something awful."

There was no demur to this sentiment, but there was still another phase of distress to be mentioned.

"No," said one of the others, "there ain't anything quite as bad as that, but it's the next thing to it to have the threshers come down on you without your having fair warning that they're coming I never *will* forget

what a time we had last year. Abe had been telling me all along that they were going to stack the wheat and thresh in the fall, when one day, 'most sundown, up comes the threshing machine right into our barn lot. I told the men there must be some mistake, but they said, no, they'd just made a bargain with Abe, and were going to begin on our wheat in the morning. I tell you I was that mad I couldn't see straight. Abe he tried to smooth it over, said he found the men had been thrown out at one place, and he thought he'd better close right in on 'em, and I needn't to worry about the victuals — just give 'em what I had."

She paused with an accent of inexpressible contempt, and covered her husband's remarks on that point with the words, "You know how men talk! Why, even our side meat was most gone, and I hadn't a single chicken frying size. Well, I tell you I didn't let the grass grow under my feet nor under Abe's neither. I made him hitch up and put himself into town the liveliest ever he did, and what with me sitting up most all night to brown coffee, and churn, and make pies, we somehow managed to put things through. I was plumb wore out when 'twas all over, but they do say the men bragged all the rest of the season on the dinner I gave 'em."

Great applause followed this story, and an elderly

woman remarked: "That's one good thing about having the threshers. You're sure to get your name up for a good cook if your victuals suit the men. I'll warrant you'll get a recommend after to-day, girls," she said, with a nod at Kate and Esther. "And it ain't a bad thing to have at your age," she added, with a knowing wink.

Esther flushed, with a look of annoyance, but Kate responded gayly: "All right. Don't any of you tell that they made the pies and doughnuts at home, and don't you ever let it out that you fried the chickens, Mrs. Elwell."

There was a sisterly resemblance between the two girls. Each was fair, with dark hair and eyes, but Esther was generally counted the prettier. She had a delicate, oval face, with soft, responsive eyes, and a color that came and went as easily as ripples in a wheat-field; the sort of face which, without the slightest coquetry of expression, was almost sure to hold and draw again the interested glance of those who met her. Kate's was of the commoner type, and yet there was nothing too common in its strong, pleasant lines, or the straightforward frankness of her ready smile.

With so many to help, the preparations for dinner could not but move briskly. At sharp twelve o'clock

the farm bell, mounted on a hickory post at the corner of the house, rang out its invitation, and almost instantly the engine stopped puffing, the whir of labor in the fields slackened, and the men had turned their faces toward the house. They were not a company of common laborers. Many of them were well-to-do farmers, who gave their services here in repayment or anticipation of similar aid in their own time of need. Most of them knew the Northmore girls, and had a friendly greeting for Kate as they passed her, standing by the swinging bell.

"Well, Miss Kate," said one of them, a tall, angular man, who, in spite of his office in the district as the New Light preacher, was one of the most active workers, "I'll wager you never rang a bell before for such a hard-looking crowd. We're 'knaves that smell of sweat.' But there's folks that look better in worse business, and I reckon you don't mind the looks of us as long as we behave ourselves. How many do you want at once? I s'pose we can't all sit down at the first table."

"Well, then," broke in a hearty young farmer, with a twinkle in his eyes, "I move that the preacher goes in with the last crowd. We don't any of us want to run our chances after he gets through."

"Oh," said the preacher, good-naturedly, "I was

calculating to wait, anyhow. Shan't have any scruples then against taking the last piece."

"Well, I'll engage that the last piece shall be as good as the first," said Kate; "but we can't give more than ten of you elbow-room at once. I might count 'Eeny, meny, miny, mo,' to see which of you shall come in now, but there's a pan of corn-bread in the oven that I'm watching, and I think you'd better settle it yourselves."

Apparently there was no difficulty, for in an extraordinarily short space of time the toilets made at the well were finished, and the dinner was furnished with guests. Loaded as the table was with good things, it might have seemed part of a Thanksgiving scene but that the holiday air was quite wanting to the men who sat around it. There was not much conversation. Some observations on crops and the price of wheat, or an occasional bit of good-natured raillery, filled the infrequent pauses in the business of eating, but the latter was carried on with a heartiness which spoke well for those who had spread the feast.

Outside, however, in the shadow of the great beech by the kitchen door, there was a waiting group who found time for talking, and the preacher, whose long, lank figure was stretched in the midst, was easily taking the leading part. Some remark had evidently started

him on a train of reminiscences, and his mellow, half-drawling tones floated through the kitchen door, and mingled with the clatter of the dishes.

"Yes, there's been a heap o' change in this country since I came here twenty years ago. 'Twas pretty much all timber through here then, and there warn't a foot o' tile in this end o' the county. I hired out to old Jim Rader. He was just clearing up his farm. Lord, he used to have me up by four o'clock in the morning, grubbing stumps, with the fog so thick you couldn't tell stump from fog before you."

"I reckon you made the acquaintance of the ager 'bout that time," observed one of the group as the preacher paused.

"Ague!" repeated the other, raising himself on his elbow and eying the speaker. "Wall, I reckon! If there's any kind I didn't get on speaking terms with, I'd like to know the name of it. I've had the third-day ague, and the seventh-day ague, the shaking ague, and the dumb ague — though why 'twas ever called 'dumb' beats me. If there's anything calculated to make a man open his mouth and express his mind freely on the way things go in this neck o' wilderness, it's that particular kind. Lord! My bones have ached so, I'd have given any man a black eye that said there was only two hundred of 'em. However, I got shet of it at last,

taking quinine. Reckon this country couldn't have been settled up without quinine, and I stayed with Rader two years and helped him break in the land. Didn't like the business much, but I had a notion in my head that I wanted to make a preacher of myself, and I didn't quit till I had the means to do it. Didn't get over-much schooling, but I wouldn't take a heap for what I did get. Mort!" he exclaimed, turning abruptly to the young man at his side, "how have you been getting on at college? They say you're going to stick right to it."

"I haven't had to give up yet," said the young man, quietly; "and I don't think it's likely any part of the course will be harder than the first two years."

"Reckon your uncle don't come down very heavy with the stamps yet," said the preacher, grimly.

The young man flushed. "'Tisn't my uncle's business to send me to college," he said; "I never asked him to."

"That's right, that's right," said the preacher, heartily. "I like your grit. For that matter, you might as well spend your breath trying to blow up a rain as trying to persuade him to spend any money on schooling that he didn't haf to. But how did you make it? You must have found it hard pulling at first."

"Oh, at first I sawed wood," said the other, lightly,

"and I'll own that was hard pulling. Half a cord before breakfast is a pretty fair stint, but I managed to make it. After that 'twas different things. I never had any trouble getting work. It was one man's horse and another man's lawn, and in the spring I had a great run helping the women at house-cleaning. Got quite a reputation for laying carpets. This year there hasn't been quite as much variety in my jobs, for I taught school in the winter."

The preacher's sallow face was tense and the shrewd gray eyes gleamed as he listened. "You'll do, Mort Elwell!" he said. "If I was a betting man, I'd bet on you and take all the chances going."

At that moment, Mrs. Elwell, who was standing in the kitchen doorway for a moment's rest and coolness, was saying to Esther Northmore, with a little sigh, "I don't wonder he had all he could do at house-cleaning. If he knew how I missed him last spring! There's nobody 'round here that can put down carpets equal to him." And then she sighed again, this time more heavily. Every one knew that if she had her way, her husband's nephew, who had grown up as one of their own family, would not be working his way through college in this stern fashion.

As for Morton himself, perhaps, being a young fellow not much given to talking of his private affairs

in public, he was glad to see a stream of men issuing just then from the house, and it was but a few minutes later when a second call summoned him and his fellows to their places.

It was hardly an hour that the wheels of the great machine stood still. At the end of that time the workers were all at their places again. And now that the masculine appetites were satisfied, the women sat down to eat, an occupation which they prolonged far beyond the time of their predecessors. To the Northmore girls, indeed, it seemed as if it would never be over, but there came an end to it at last, and even to the washing of the dishes.

Esther would not consent to the proposal of the women that they should do the work without her, but Kate — with better wisdom perhaps — accepted it with the frankest pleasure. She was a girl who had a healthy curiosity about everything that went on around her, and no one was surprised to see her presently standing in the field, beside the engine that made the wheels of the threshing machine go round, getting points from the man in charge as to how they did it. After that an invitation from Morton Elwell, who was on the feed board, to come up and watch the work from that point was instantly accepted, amid the laughing approval of the crowd. For her sake the speed of the

work was slackened a little, the bundles were thrown from the loaded wagon more slowly, and Morton found time, while cutting their bands and thrusting them in at their place, to answer all her questions.

It was a pretty picture she made, standing in her blue gingham dress on this crimson throne, her sunbonnet fallen on her shoulders and her dark hair blowing about her face, but she knew nothing of this. She was thinking only of that wonderful machine, and she knew before she left her place how it whirled the loosened sheaves from sight, rubbed out the grain in its rough iron palms, sent the free clean wheat in a rushing stream down to the waiting measure, and flung out the broken straw to be caught on the pitchforks of the laborers behind and pressed to its place on the growing stack.

There was an exhilaration in it not to be dreamed of by her sister, who glanced at her occasionally from the kitchen windows and wondered how she could bear to be in the midst of all that heat and noise. For her part, she was quite content to let the machine stand merely as part of the picture. And perhaps for her it wore the greater dignity from her vague idea of its internal workings.

The afternoon wore away swiftly. There was a five o'clock supper to be served to the men, but this

was not the elaborate affair the dinner had been, and by sunset of the long bright day the work indoors and out had been brought to a successful finish. The shining stubble of the field lay bare except for the fresh clean straw stack. The machine was rumbling on its way to another farm, and Jake Erlock's kitchen had been restored to a state of order equal to that in which his kindly neighbors had found it.

It had been expected that Dr. Northmore would come for his daughters, but, as he had not appeared when the work was finished, they accepted the offer of a ride home with a farmer who was going their way. The sight of them sitting in the big Studebaker wagon must have acted as a prompter to Morton Elwell's memory, for he suddenly recalled that he had an important errand in town, and proposed to go along too, a proposal to which the owner of the wagon agreed with the greatest good will. There was not a chair for him, — the girls had been established in the only two, — and the farmer and his hired man occupied the seat, but the young man settled him on a bundle of straw in the bottom of the wagon, with an air of supreme content.

They were old comrades, he and the Northmore girls; the girls could not remember the time when he had not been their escort and champion, their

Fidus Achates, all the more free to devote himself to their service because he had no sisters or even girl cousins of his own. He was two years older than either of them, and his years at college seemed to make him older still, but if his absence had made any difference in the perfect freedom of their relations, he, at least, had not guessed it.

"Well, you girls must be glad to be through with this," he said, as the team started at a rattling pace down the road. "I know you're awfully tired."

He included them both in his glance, but it rested longest on Esther's face, which certainly looked a little weary under the shadow of her wide straw hat.

"You must be tired yourself, Mort," she said, looking down at him. "You've been working ever since daylight, haven't you?"

"Oh, but I'm used to that," he said gayly, "and this is new business for you. I must say, though, I never saw things go better. There won't be anybody round here to beat you at housekeeping if you keep on like this."

She frowned slightly. "It was your aunt who managed everything," she said; "all we did was to help a little."

"That isn't what she'll say about it," said the young man, and then he added warmly: "but my

Aunt Jenny's a host wherever you put her. There's no doubt about that. My, what a good place this world would be if everybody in it was made like her!" And there was an assent to this which ought to have made the good woman's ears burn, if there is any truth in the old saying.

For a while the talk ran lightly on the incidents of the day; then it grew more personal, and plans for the summer fell under discussion. Morton's were all for work. He was of age, master of his own time, and he meant to make a good sum toward the expenses of the coming year at college. He talked of his hopes with the utmost frankness, and then questioned of theirs as one who had the fullest rights of friendship.

"Will you go away anywhere?" he asked; "or are you going to stay at home all summer?"

"That depends," said Kate, answering for both. "We may go up to Maxinkuckee for a little while; but what we'd like to do, what we'd like best—" she paused upon the words with a lifting of her hands and the drawing of a long ecstatic breath, "would be to make a visit at grandfather's. You can't think how he's urging us to come."

"Do you mean go to New England?" he exclaimed, sitting up straight on his bundle of straw.

"Yes, to mother's old home," said Kate. "Just

think, we haven't been there since we were little girls. Mother's been trying to persuade grandfather to come out here, but he says he's too old to make the journey, and that we must come there. He has fairly set his heart on it."

"And so have the others too," said Esther. "Stella's letters have been full of it for the last six months."

"Stella's that cousin of yours who's such an artist, isn't she?" said Morton. He was looking extremely interested.

"Oh, she's an artist and everything else that's lovely," said Esther. "I don't suppose you ever saw the kind of girl that she is. She has a studio in Boston in the winters. She sent me a picture of it once, and it's perfectly charming. And only think, she's been in Europe twice — once she was studying over there. And she's seen those wonderful old places and the famous pictures, and been a part of everything that's beautiful."

"That's the sort of thing you'd like to do yourself, I suppose," said the young man, drawing a wisp of straw slowly through his fingers.

"Like it!" she cried. "To travel, to study, to see beautiful things, to hear beautiful music, and to be in touch every day with charming, cultivated people! Oh, if I had half a chance, wouldn't I take it!"

There was something very wistful in her voice as she said it, but not more wistful than the look that came into Morton Elwell's eyes at that moment. He turned them away from her face, and the rattle of the big wagon filled the silence.

"You ought to show Mort that picture of Stella you got the other day," said Kate, suddenly.

Esther took a letter from her pocket. "I brought it out to the farm to-day on purpose to show your aunt," she said, and she handed him a photograph which he regarded for a moment with a bewildered expression.

"Why, it looks like a picture of Greek statuary," he said; "one of the old goddesses, or something of that sort."

"That's just the way she meant to have it look," said Esther, triumphantly. "You see how artistic she is."

The young man still looked mystified. "But is her hair really white, like that?" he asked.

"Why, of course not," said Esther, in a rather disgusted tone. "She powdered it and did it in a low coil for the sake of the picture. Then she put the white folds over her shoulders to make it look like a bust against the dark background, and she had the lights and shadows arranged to give just the right effect. Isn't it exquisite?"

"I can't say I admire it," said the young man, grimly; "I'd rather see people look as if they were made of flesh and blood."

Kate laughed. She had privately expressed the same opinion herself, but she did not choose to encourage him in criticising her relatives.

"You're an insensible Philistine, Mort Elwell," she said, with a sly glance at her sister. "That's what Stella'd call you, and she knows."

The point of the taunt was lost on the young man, but he had an impression, derived from early lessons in the Sabbath School, that the Philistines were a race of heathen idolaters, and he resented the charge with spirit.

"You'd better call your cousin the Philistine," he retorted; "I'm sure I have no liking for graven images."

This was too much for Esther. She snatched the picture from his hand and bent a look of admiration upon the shapely white head, with its classic profile and downcast eyes, which made ample amends for the cold scrutiny to which it had just been subjected.

"It is perfectly beautiful," she said, with slow emphasis; "I don't see how you can be unappreciative."

Morton did not press his obnoxious opinion. He grew rather silent, and except for an occasional

sally from Kate, conversation was at a low ebb for the rest of the way.

Meanwhile the sunset flamed and faded in the west. The evening breeze sprang up, and cool, restful shadows fell on the wide, rich landscape.

"Home at last!" cried Kate, as a bend in the road brought them suddenly upon a house of the colonial style, shaded by fine old trees, at the edge of town. "And there's mother in the doorway looking for us."

CHAPTER II.

TALKING IT OVER.

MRS. NORTHMORE was at the gate to greet her daughters when the great wagon stopped.

"We knew you would find some one to bring you home," she said, smiling up at them. "Your father was disappointed that he couldn't come for you himself, but he took our friends to the station, and then, just as he was ready to start for you, he was called to the other end of the town. Come in, Morton," she added, turning to the young man, who was helping the girls over the wheel; "I must have a full account of the doings to-day, and it may be a one-sided report if I have only the family version of it."

"But there is only one side, Mrs. Northmore," said the young man. "Everything went gloriously, — specially the dinner, — and everybody behaved beautifully except me. Kate'll tell you how bad I was. No, I can't stay. There's an errand I must do before dark."

"I shan't take anybody's report against *you*, Morton, unless it's your own, and I'm not sure that I'll admit

even that," said Mrs. Northmore. It was in her eyes as well as her voice how much she liked the big brown fellow. "Well, if you must go — but come and see us soon. Don't work so hard this summer that you'll have no time for your friends."

She took an arm of each of the girls and walked with them up the gravel path between the rows of blossoming catalpas. "So the day has gone well?" she said, glancing from one to the other.

"As if you had been there yourself, mother," said Esther, and Kate added: "It's been a regular picnic. I never enjoyed a day more in my life."

In different ways each of the girls resembled her strongly. Esther had the broad, low forehead and serious eyes, but Kate had the resolute mouth with a touch of playfulness lurking at the corners. A girl, much younger than either, rolled sleepily out of the hammock as they stepped on the veranda.

"Oh, I'm glad you've come," she said, rubbing her eyes. "This has been the longest, stupidest day I ever saw. Papa's been away, and mamma's been busy with the company, and Aunt Milly's been so cross because she couldn't go out to the farm, that she's been ready to snap my head off every time I looked in at the kitchen. Even the cat went off visiting."

"What a dull day you've had of it, Virgie!" said Esther, kissing the child's flushed cheek. "But what ailed Aunt Milly? She knows she couldn't be spared to go out there to-day."

"Of course she knows it," said Mrs. Northmore, "and she would have felt even worse to be spared from here, but I suspect the real grievance was the cheerfulness with which you girls left her behind. She wanted to feel that she was needed in both places. Poor old Milly, she can't reconcile herself to the idea that we can really get along without her anywhere."

"Why didn't we think of that?" cried Kate. "If we'd asked her advice about a lot of things, and shaken our heads over the difficulties we should get into, with her out of our reach, she'd have been happy all day. Esther, you and I are a pair of stupids, but I'll make it up to her yet."

"Oh, she's forgiven you already," said Mrs. Northmore; "and if she punishes you at all, it'll be by way of showing you some special favors, you may be sure of that."

"There she comes now," said Kate, as footsteps were heard approaching on the tiled floor of the hall; and she added, listening to the thud of the heavy feet, whose stout slippers dropping at the heels doubled

the fall with a solemn tap, "walking as if she went on two wooden legs and a pair of crutches."

The comparison was not bad, and the laugh that followed it had hardly ended when the old servant showed a lugubrious face at the door.

"Howdy, Aunt Milly?" cried Kate before the other had a chance to speak. "Here we are, you see, home again. I was just coming out to the kitchen to tell you how we got along, and see if you could give us a bite to eat. I suppose you think we had our suppers at the farm, and so we did; but it wasn't like one of your suppers, and I guess you know how much appetite you have when you're all mixed up with the cooking. Don't bother to bring anything in here, but just let us sit out in the kitchen with you."

At this artful proposal Milly's face shortened unmistakably. "Don't know's I've got anything you'd keer about," she began with a show of reluctance, "but I'll knock round and see what I can find for you."

"Oh, you'll find something — you always do," said Kate. "By the way, I thought I smelled something good when I was coming up to the house."

"It was the catalpa blossoms, and you know it," said Esther, laughing, and looking at her sister with a reproving glance, when the door had closed behind Milly.

"Well, but she did make a spice cake, and it smells

awfully good," said Virgie. "It's warm now, and she wouldn't break a crumb of it for me."

"There!" said Kate, triumphantly. "You see how people are helped out, when they prevaricate for high moral ends. Come on to the kitchen. I'll never pretend to be smart again if I can't put Aunt Milly in good spirits before we've been there long."

It would have been an incomplete picture indeed of the Northmore household which did not include old Aunt Milly. An important figure she was and had been ever since the girls could remember. But in truth her connection with the family was of much older date than that. She had been born and reared a slave on the Kentucky plantation which had been the home of Dr. Northmore's boyhood. He had left it earlier than she, having before the war gone out from the large circle of brothers to establish himself in his profession in a neighboring state. But when, in the changed times, the servants had scattered from the old place, Milly had made her way to the home of her favorite, and urged with many entreaties that she might fill a post of service there.

Dr. Northmore could not resist the appeal, nor his young wife his wish in the matter, and though the service had been a trying one at first to the energetic Northern girl, yet, as time went on, and children, one

after another, were added to the household, she learned to set truer value on the faithful, affectionate servant, whose devotion nothing could tire; and now, when Milly was old and infirm, her place was as secure as it had been in her palmiest days. She herself had full confidence in her ability to fill it still, and her one fear for the future was that she might be forced to share it with one of those "transients" who rendered their service by the week, — a class for which her high-bred contempt knew no bounds.

Kate had not misjudged the effect of her stratagem on the simple old soul. It was a long time since her young ladies had done her the honor of eating at her own pine table, and Milly forgot the grief of the day in the zest of her hospitality, and accepted their praises for the feast she furnished, with a delight quite different from the forgiving dignity with which she had meant to pierce the hearts of her darlings.

"Well, yes, I did stir up a little cake for you," she admitted, when Kate, after due admiration of the fresh and fragrant loaf, accused her of misrepresenting the extent of her supplies. "Laws, I knew you'd be wantin' a bite of somethin' afore you went to bed. It allers makes my stomach feel powerful empty to ride in one o' them wagons, jouncin' round in them straight-backed cheers."

"And you must have named it for me, Aunt Milly," said Kate, with her eyes on the cake.

This was an allusion to one of Milly's culinary secrets, and she received it with a smile which fairly transfigured the dusky old face. She had her own theories of cake-making, theories which she maintained with the unanswerable logic of her own surpassing skill.

"You see, Miss Kate," she had said years before, when the girl had come to the kitchen with a request to be instructed in the mysteries of the art, "there's somethin' curus about makin' cake. It ain't all in havin' a good receipt, though it stan's to reason if you don't take the right things there's no use puttin' 'em together. An' it ain't all in the way you put 'em together neither, though I 'low that makes a heap o' difference. Folks has their 'pinions, an' there's some that says you must take your hand to the mixin', an' some that says you must use a wooden spoon, an' I knew one cook that would have it you must stir the batter all one way, or 'twould be plumb ruined. But I can't say as I *jest* hold with any o' them idees, nor yet with the notions folks has about the bakin', though it's true as you live, a body's got to be mighty keerful on that p'int. Laws, I've known folks dassn't let a cat run across the kitchen floor while the cake's in the oven.

"I tell you, Miss Kate," Milly had proceeded, growing more impressive, as the greatness of her subject loomed before her, "there's a heap o' things to be looked to in the makin' o' cake, but there's somethin' besides all them p'ints I've mentioned. It takes the *right person* to make it! There's some that's been 'lected to make cake an' some that hasn't. There ain't no other doctrine to account for the luck folks has. I'll show you my way, but I can't tell beforehand how it'll work with you. There's one thing, though, I'll jest say private between you'n me," she added, lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper, "an' I ain't one to take up with no superstitious notions neither; when you want to make an extra fine cake, you name it for somebody that loves you jest as you're shettin' the oven door, an' if you've made that cake all right, an' if you ain't deceived in that person, your cake'll come out splendid."

"But if you *are* deceived?" Kate had suggested solemnly.

"Then," said Milly, lifting her finger, and shaking it with slow emphasis, "as sure's you're born that cake'll fall in the pan an' be sad. There can't nothin' on earth prevent it."

"But that is such an uncertain way," Kate had objected. "You can't always tell whether or not a

person loves you. Why don't you name it for somebody that you love yourself? Then you could be sure."

But Milly had shaken her head wisely. It was the nature of cake, as it was of love, to be uncertain, and she refused to reconstruct her charm.

All this had happened years before, but when, by some lucky turn of memory, Kate recalled it now, and suggested that this perfect specimen of cake had been baked under the inspiration of her own love for Milly, the last shadow of the old woman's melancholy vanished. "Well, Honey," she said radiantly, "I reckon I shouldn't have missed it fur if I had."

She was prepared now to enjoy to the full the account which the girls gave of the experiences at the farm, including everything of importance, from Kate's exaltation on the machine to Morton Elwell's capture of the doughnuts. Over the latter incident her eyes fairly rolled with delight, and she interrupted the narrator to exclaim, "That chile's boun' to make a powerful smart man. Puts me in mind of Mars Clay, your uncle, you know, what got to be kunnel in the army. That chile did have the most 'mazin' faculty for comin' roun' when a body was cookin', an' the beatin'est way findin' out where things was kep' an' helpin' hisself that ever I did see. I never

will forgit how he fooled your grandma one year 'bout the jelly. Ole Miss she allus put her jelly in glasses with lids to 'em. She had a closet full that year, an' every glass of it would turn out slick an' solid. Mars Clay, he foun' he could turn the jelly out on the lid, an' cut a slice off'm the bottom, an' jist slide the jelly back again. I seed him do it one day, but I never let on, and your grandma she never foun' out, but she 'lowed 'twas mighty strange how her jelly did shwink that year."

She shook with glee at that remembrance, and Kate forgave Morton Elwell over again for outwitting her, since the act had been the means of giving her one more story of the old days. But Milly's delight reached its climax when Kate told of the favor with which the various dishes had been received at dinner, and how Farmer Giles, after helping himself to the third piece of corn-bread, had declared it the best he ever tasted, to which she had replied that it ought to be; it was made by Aunt Milly's own receipt.

"Bless your heart, chile," cried the old woman; "you didn't tell him that now, did you? You mustn't make the old darky too proud!"

She did not enter with quite as much enthusiasm into Kate's description of the threshing machine, and reverted with a sigh to the days when the thresher was

content with his flail, an instrument which she extolled as being "a heap safer than that great snorting machine" (she persisted in confounding its functions with those of the engine); and she refused to share in Kate's wonder that people didn't starve in those days waiting for the grain to be threshed.

The two were still discussing harvests past and present when Esther, feeling that she had done her full duty there, left the kitchen. She had never held quite the place in Milly's affections which Kate enjoyed, nor had she of late years listened with her sister's contentment to the old woman's thrice-told tales. She left them now and went to seek her mother.

Mrs. Northmore was seated on the cool veranda with her hands in her lap, and that look of tired content which tells of a busy but successful day. A generous hospitality had left her a little worn. Esther sat down on the step at her feet and leaned her arms across her lap in a childish fashion she had never outgrown.

"I wish I didn't get so tired of people whom I really like," she said. "It would break Aunt Milly's heart if she knew how she bores me. It seems to me sometimes I get tired of everybody — everybody but you, mother dear."

Mrs. Northmore looked into her daughter's eyes with a smile.

"I don't think I should feel hurt, my dear, if you wanted to get away from me, too, sometimes. Nobody quite suits all our moods. I wouldn't reproach myself on that score, if I were you."

"But it seems so disloyal, when it's anybody — anybody that you really care a great deal about," said Esther. Her mother's smile kept its tinge of amusement, and the girl's face grew more serious.

"I wonder sometimes if I'm made like other girls," she said. "It isn't just getting tired of people. It's getting tired of things in general, and longing for something larger than anything that comes into my life. I don't know as I can make you understand quite what I mean," she went on, a strained note creeping into her voice, "but somehow it came over me to-day more strongly than it ever did before that I could never be satisfied just to live out my life in the common humdrum way. Perhaps it was the talk of those women. I suppose they're just as good and useful as the average, but it seemed as if they thought there was nothing in the world for women to do but to be married, and keep house, and take care of children. Even Mrs. Elwell, nice as she is, appeared to think so, and it all seemed to me so poor and small. I almost despised them, mother."

The smile had gone now from Mrs. Northmore's

eyes. "Oh, my dear!" she said; and then she was silent. Of what use would it be to tell this child, with the experiences of life all untried, that the common lot, which she despised, had in its round the truest joys and deepest satisfactions? Years and love and happy work must bring the knowledge of that. She stroked the brown head for a moment without speaking. It was Esther who found words first.

"You never felt like those women, did you, mother? You don't seem a bit like them. You are always reading and thinking, and you know about a thousand things they've never thought of."

The smile came back to Mrs. Northmore's eyes, but there was a touch of sadness in it. "My dear girl," she said, "I'm not half as wise as you think I am; but if I have any wisdom I'm sure I've found most of it, and my happiness too, in those same common things. There isn't such a difference between me and those friends of ours as you imagine."

The girl looked unconvinced. Presently she said, with a sigh, "If one could only *be* something or *do* something! When I think of the people who have been great — the heroes, the poets, the artists, people who have accomplished something that lasted — they seem to me the only ones who have been really happy. Just to be one of the mass, and live, and die, and be forgotten, seems so pitiful."

There had never been any closed doors between Mrs. Northmore's heart and her daughters. She had been the friend and confidante of each, and she knew this mood of Esther's; but the day had deepened its color to an unusual sombreness. The girl had never before disclosed a feeling quite like this, and for once the mother was at a loss how to help her. To say that all could not be great was trite, and had no comfort in it.

"I think we often make a mistake in our envying of the great," she said gently. "The happiness to them was not in being known and remembered beyond others; few of them knew in their lifetime that this would be true of them, or even the value of their work to the world. The real happiness lay in doing with success the thing they cared to do. To know our work and do it, Esther, not the sort of work nor the reward, but the finding and doing — *that* is the true joy of the greatest, and it is open to us all."

She had spoken with simple seriousness, as she always did when others brought her their troubles, however fanciful. Perhaps the girl did not grasp the thought, or, grasping, find the comfort in it.

"But it seems to me that some of us have no special work to do, nor any special faculty for doing

it," she said. "Here am I, for instance. What am I good for? I seem to myself to be just one of those creatures who are made for nothing but to fill up the spaces between the people who amount to something."

Mrs. Northmore pressed her hand for a moment lightly on the dark appealing eyes of the girl. "If we are in earnest," she said gently, "and if it is usefulness, not praise that we are caring about, we shall find our work; and be sure it will seem special to us if we love it as we ought."

There were a few minutes of silence; then the girl said more quietly, but with a note of despondence in her voice: "If I had gone to school longer and tried to fit myself for something, perhaps I might have found out what I was good for. I didn't care much when I left Lance Hall, and I never studied as hard as I might while I was there; but I've thought more about it since then."

A look of pain came into Mrs. Northmore's face. It was a regret the girl had never expressed before, but one which had been often in her own thoughts. Yet the year in boarding-school, which had followed Esther's graduation from the high school, had been all that Dr. Northmore could afford to give his daughter. She was considered in the region quite an accomplished girl, but her mother, at least, real-

ized what a broader and more serious education might have done for her. She realized it at this moment with unusual force.

"I wish you might have had the best the schools can give, and some other things you have missed, Esther," she said. And then she added, "If we were only a little richer!"

There was a tone in Mrs. Northmore's voice which one heard but seldom, and the girl noted it with a sudden compunction. "I haven't missed anything that I deserved to have," she said quickly, "and I've had more than most girls. I know that. It's *you* who go without things, mother. You're always planning and saving, and pretending you don't want to have anything or go anywhere." And then the impatience came into her tone again, though she was not thinking of herself, as she added, "Sometimes I can't see how it is that we have so little money to spend, when father has such a good practice."

Mrs. Northmore sighed. "Your father has never looked very sharply after his own interests in money matters. He has been too busy with other things, and too generous, for that," she said. And then she added, almost gayly: "But I have never lacked for anything; and it is so much easier to bear the sort of mistakes your father makes than it would be to bear

some others! The 'handle' — you remember what Epictetus says about the 'two handles' — why, the handle to bear *our* sort of trouble with stands out all round, and is so big one can't help laying hold of it."

Perhaps it was the light-heartedness with which she spoke, more than the slight reproof which the words contained, that made Esther's head drop in her mother's lap. "I wish I were half as good as you are, mother," she whispered.

The voices of Kate and Virgie from the direction of the kitchen made her spring to her feet a minute later. "I don't want to be here when they come," she said, dashing her handkerchief across her eyes. "I'm tired and disagreeable. Good night."

She was off before the others had reached the porch, and a half hour later, when Kate followed her to her room, she was in bed, more than willing that her sister should think her closed eyelids drowsy with sleep, an impression which did not, however, prevent the other from indulging in some lively monologue as she undressed. Her father had come home, she said, and was delighted with the report of the day, but there was a lot left to tell him in the morning. "Besides," she added, "I could see there was something on mother's mind that she wanted to talk over with him alone, so I came away."

She was silent for fully two minutes, then burst out, "I say, wasn't it great, what Mort Elwell said about Stella Saxon's picture?" She chuckled at the remembrance, then added: "By the way, did it occur to you that he wasn't particularly enthusiastic over the idea of our going to grandfather's? My, but I wish we could go."

"I don't know what difference our plans make to him," said Esther, in a tone which indicated that her sleepiness had not reached an acute stage.

"Oh, they make plenty of difference to him; at least yours do," said Kate, sagely.

"Well, he might spare himself the trouble," said Esther. "I must say I think Morton Elwell takes too much for granted, lately."

Kate stopped braiding her hair and stared at her sister. "I don't know what he takes for granted, except that old friends don't change," she said. She continued to stare for a minute, then remarked slowly: "I know what ails you, Esther. You want to have a lot of romance and all that sort of thing. For my part I never could see that romance amounted to anything but getting all mixed up and having a lot of trouble." And having delivered herself of this she apparently resigned herself to her own reflections.

On the porch, still sitting in the evening darkness,

Mrs. Northmore was saying to her husband at that moment: "Philip, what do you say to letting the girls go to New England? We've talked about it a good deal; why not settle on it? Now that the wheat has turned out so well, couldn't we afford it?"

"Why, I think 'twould be an excellent plan, Lucia," said the doctor, cordially. "I've thought so all along, but I was under the impression that you wanted the wheat money to go another way."

She gave a little sigh. "Yes," she said, "I did want to reduce that mortgage, but some things can wait better than others. It would do the girls good to go, and I believe Esther really needs a change."

"You think the child is not well?" queried the doctor, with a note of surprise in his voice.

"Oh, not ill," said Mrs. Northmore, quickly, "but"— she hesitated a moment, "she is rather restless and inclined to be a little morbid and moody. It might be worth a good deal to her to have a change of scene, and get some new ideas."

"By all means pack her off," said the doctor. "It's a prescription I always like to give my patients; and if that is yours for her I'll fill it with all confidence." He rose and stretched his long arms with a tired gesture. "I believe it's bedtime for me," he said, "and I rather think it ought to be for you too."

CHAPTER III.

BETWEEN TIMES.

IT was at breakfast the next morning that the great decision was announced.

"Well, young ladies," said the doctor, looking from one to the other of his older daughters, "what do you think your mother and I have decided to do with you?" He paused for just an instant, then gave the answer himself without waiting for theirs. "Nothing short of sending you East for the rest of the summer. We've held a council, and decided that nothing else will do in your case."

They caught their breath, gasping for a moment at the suddenness of it, then Kate brought her hands together with a clap. "Glorious!" she cried; "that's the best news I ever heard. But, do you know, I felt in my bones last night that it was coming."

The doctor laughed. The idea of this plump young creature deriving any premonitions from her bones amused him. "And what did yours indicate?" he asked, turning to Esther.

"Nothing as delightful as that," she said. Her face was not as bright as Kate's. She wondered, with a sudden misgiving, whether her discontented mood of the evening before had any share in bringing the decision, and the thought was in the glance which she sent at that moment toward her mother.

The latter met it with a smiling clearness. "Your father has been in favor of it for some time," she said, "and now that the wheat has turned out so well there is really nothing in the way."

The shadow flitted from Esther's eyes. "Oh, it will be beautiful to go, perfectly beautiful! I only wish Virgie could go, too," she said, with a glance at the little sister, whose face had grown very sober.

"Now you needn't worry a bit about Virgie," said the doctor, putting his arm around the child, who sat beside him. "Your mother and I couldn't stand it without her, and we're going to see that she has a good time. Just you wait, Virgie," he added, lowering his voice confidentially, "I have a plan for this fall, and you're going to be in it. There'll be a fine slice of cake left for us three when the others have eaten theirs all up."

He was exceedingly fond of his children. With their training, either physical or mental, he had never charged himself, — perhaps because they were girls, —

but to gratify their wants, and to shield them as far as possible from the hardships of life, was a side of parental privilege to which he was keenly responsive.

"But when are we going?" Kate was already demanding.

"Just as soon as your mother can get you ready," said the doctor; "and I shouldn't think that need to take very long. I fancy she has your wardrobe planned already. Something kept her awake last night, and when I asked her, sometime in the small hours, what it was, she said she was contriving a new way to make over one of your old dresses. For your mother," he added, smiling at that lady, "is like the wife of John Gilpin. Though bent on pleasure — yours, of course — she has 'a frugal mind.'"

"Think of being likened to that immortal woman!" cried Mrs. Northmore. "I only hope my plans will work better than hers did."

"Oh, your plans always work," said the doctor. "But don't tax your wits too far reconstructing old clothes. Get some new ones; get 'em pretty and stylish. I want the girls to be fixed up nice if they're going to visit those Eastern relatives."

"Hear! hear!" cried Kate. "Papa, your ideas and mine fit beautifully."

He was in the best of spirits. The good wheat

crop had already brought the payment of some long-standing medical bills, and Dr. Northmore could always adjust himself to a time of abundance more gracefully than to the day of small things.

"We shall treat you handsomely in the matter of our expenses, you may depend on that," said his wife. She had no intention of relaxing her carefulness in the use of money; but she never wounded her husband's pride, and she always indulged him in the amused smile with which, in times of comparative ease, he seemed to regard feminine economies.

There were plenty of them in the days that immediately followed, but the girls had most of the things they wanted, and their father was more than satisfied with the pretty becoming dresses in which they bloomed out, one after another, for his benefit. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Northmore was quite as desirous as he that her girls should be well provided for this summer outing. She was a bit of a philosopher, but she never affected the slightest indifference to the matter of dress. She had excellent taste herself, and had given it to her children.

Things moved so swiftly that in little more than a week they were ready. There were good-by calls to be made, and a host of others to be received from friends who came to offer their congratulations and

express effusive hopes for their pleasure during the summer, for the news of their plan had spread rapidly. But there was one friend to whom word came late, and who, but for accident, might have missed it altogether.

This was Morton Elwell. The girls were walking home from the village late one afternoon, when Kate, glancing back, saw the young man with the New Light preacher. The two had been harvesting together at the other end of the county, and since that day at the farm neither of them had been in town.

"There's Mort Elwell!" she exclaimed; and then she faced about, drawing her sister with her, and waited frankly for him to come up.

The two men quickened their steps instantly. "Upon my word, I didn't know you till you turned," said Morton. "My, how fine you look!"

Kate smiled, and Esther flushed. Perhaps it was one of the liberties she did not quite like his taking, that he should be so plainly observant of their new dresses.

"Well, it's a wonder that anybody knows *you*, face to face, Mort," said Kate. "I declare you're as brown as a mulatto."

"Am I?" said the young man cheerfully. "Well,

I'm at the engine now, and what with smoke and sunburn it paints a fellow up in good style."

"I suppose you know we're going away next Wednesday," said Kate. She had fallen behind with him, leaving Esther to walk with the preacher.

"Why, no, I didn't know it," said Morton, fairly stopping in his walk. "Is that so?"

"'Certain true, black and blue,' as we used to say when we were children," replied Kate. "We're going to Grandfather Saxon's. It was all settled that night after we got home from the threshing." She paused a moment; then, as he had not spoken, added, with a little pout: "I suppose you couldn't strain a point to say you're glad. Everybody else seems to say it easily enough."

"Why, of course I'm glad," said Morton, hastily, "and I hope you'll have a tremendously good time; but it sort of takes a body's breath away, it's so sudden. When are you coming back?"

"We're not thinking of that part yet," said Kate; "but not before September."

His face lengthened. "Why, I shan't see anything of you girls all vacation," he said. "I did think when the harvesting was over I should get an occasional glimpse of you. I wish threshing hadn't begun so early this year."

"What's that?" said the preacher, turning his head. "Wanting seed time and harvest put off for your special benefit! That won't do, Mort."

"Oh, not that exactly," said the young man. "But it *is* sort of hard on a fellow not to get any chance of seeing his friends all summer, when that's the only time in the year he's at home."

"There'll be plenty of your friends left," said Esther. She had half turned her head, and was looking wonderfully pretty in her new leghorn hat with the corn-flowers and poppies.

"Oh!" he said, reproachfully; but he had no chance to say anything more just then, for the preacher claimed her attention.

"How far East are you going?" he asked.

"To mother's old home in New England," said the girl. The preacher gave a surprised whistle. "Was your mother raised back there?" he demanded. "Well, I never should have known but she was a born Hoosier."

As a born Hoosier herself the young lady appreciated the compliment. "No," she said, "mother came from Massachusetts; but she's lived here twenty years, and I don't suppose there's much difference now."

"Oh, we'll let her have the name now," said the

preacher, good-naturedly. "But it's queer I never heard her say a word about 'Boston.'"

"She didn't come from Boston," said Esther. "There's ever so much of New England outside of Boston, you know."

"'Pears to cover the whole ground for most Yankees," said the preacher, dryly. "I don't recollect as I ever talked with any of 'em — except your mother — that it didn't leak out mighty quick if they'd come from anywheres near the 'Hub.' 'Peared to carry it round as a sort of measuring stick, to size up everything else by."

His figure was a trifle mixed, but it met the case. After a moment he added: "Well, I'm right glad you're going. It's a good thing for young folks to see something of the world outside of the home corner. I always thought I'd like to travel a bit myself, but I reckon I'll never get to do it any other way than going round with a threshing machine, and that don't exactly hit my notion of travelling for pleasure. Eh, Mort?" he queried, turning to the young man behind him.

The latter was not in a mood to feel the full humor of the remark, which he had heard in spite of his apparent attention to Kate's lively chatter. "Can't say there's much variety in it," he replied rather absently.

"However," continued the preacher, turning again to Esther, "I did go to Kentucky once when I was a little chap. No," he said, shaking his head, as he caught the eager question in her eyes, "not in the Blue Grass country where your father was raised, but in among the knobs where the Cumberlands begin. It was a mighty poor rough country. I reckon you'll see something of the same sort where you're going."

"Oh, but that is a beautiful country! Mother has always said so," cried the girl, looking quite distressed.

"Well, maybe you'd call that country down there pretty too," said the preacher, with easy accommodation, "though it's all in a heap, and rocks all over it. Reminds me of the story about a soldier from somewhere hereabouts that was going through there in the war-time, and stopped to talk a minute with a fellow that was hoeing corn. 'Well, stranger,' says he, 'reckon you're about ready to move out of here.' 'Why so?' says the fellow, looking sort of stupid. 'Why, I see you've got the land all rolled up ready to start,' says the soldier."

The preacher interrupted his mellow drawl for a moment to join in her laugh at the story, then went on: "Now my notion of a pretty country is one that

looks as if you could raise something on it; the sort we've got round here, you know," he added, stretching out his arm with an inclusive gesture.

His idea of landscape beauty was not Esther Northmore's, but as she looked at that moment over the peaceful country, golden and green with its generous harvests, with here and there a stretch of forest rising tall and straight against the sky, she felt its quiet charm with a thrill of pride and gladness. "Yes; this is a beautiful country," she said softly. "I shall never change my mind about that."

They had reached a point where another road crossed the one they were following, and the preacher paused in his walk. "I must turn off here," he said. "Good-by! and take care of yourselves." He shook hands heartily with each of the girls, and added, with a nod at Esther: "Give my special regards to your mother. Tell her I've just found out that she's a Yankee, and I don't think any less of her for it."

He was an odd genius, this New Light preacher. The Northmores were by no means of his flock, but the feeling between them was most cordial. In his office of comforter he had touched that of the healer more than once among the families under his care, and the touch had left a mutual respect be-

"HE LEANED ON THE GATE WHEN HE HAD OPENED IT FOR THE GIRLS."

tween him and the doctor. With Mrs. Northmore the feeling was even warmer. Rough and ill-educated as he was, there was a native force and shrewdness in the man by no means common, and they were joined with a frank honesty which would have attracted her in a far less interesting person than he.

Morton Elwell walked on to the house, but refused the girls' invitation to come in to supper. "You know mother would like to have you," Esther said, with polite urgence. "She was complaining the other day that we saw so little of you."

But Morton was resolute. Perhaps the thresher's costume in which he was arrayed, the blue flannel shirt, jean trousers, and heavy boots, none too black, helped him to stand by the promise he had given Mrs. Elwell. "No," he said; "I told Aunt Jenny I wouldn't fail to come home to supper." But he leaned on the gate when he had opened it for the girls, and stood for a minute as if he found it hard to turn away.

"Of course you'll write to me first," he said, glancing from one to the other. There had been a correspondence of a desultory sort between them ever since he went away to college, and he seemed to take for granted that it would go on now. And then he added, looking to Esther, "You wrote to me real often when

you were a little girl, and went to your grandfather's before."

Her color rose a trifle. "You have a remarkably good memory, Mort, to remember such little things when they happened so long ago," she said lightly.

"Why, I've got every one of them now," he replied. "I was looking them over not so very long ago, and they were the jolliest kind of letters, with little postscripts added by Kate in cipher. She was five, I believe, then. They were joint productions in those days, but you needn't feel obliged to make them so now."

"I suppose we needn't feel '*obliged*' to write them at all," she said, lifting her eyebrows a little.

"Oh, you wouldn't go back on a fellow like that!" said Morton. "Why, it would break me all up."

There was something so affectionately boyish in his manner that Kate said instantly: "Of course we'll write to you, and tell you everything that happens. You may wish my letters were postscripts again before you get through with them."

And Esther added cheerfully, "Yes, if you want to add a few more specimens of my handwriting to that ancient collection, you shall certainly have them."

"Maybe we'll send you our pictures too," said Kate." "We're going to have some taken after we get there, and if they're good —"

He broke in upon her with a sudden eagerness. "Well, don't let your cousin get you up like statues. I hate that kind."

Kate burst into a laugh, but Esther looked impatient. "Oh, dear, don't you know that common, everyday faces like ours can't be made to look that way?" she said.

"Can't they? Well, I'm awfully glad of it," he replied. "Good-by." And then he grasped their hands for a moment, and struck off at a long, swinging gait across the field that lay between their home and his uncle's.

The days that were left ran fast. They were full and hurried, as the last days of preparation are apt to be in spite of the best-laid plans. But the girls managed to take some rides with their father, who, in view of the coming separation, seemed to expect more of their company than usual, and Kate contrived to hold some sittings in the kitchen with Aunt Milly, who had been in a depressed state of mind ever since the summer plan had been decided on. In spite of being one who held with no superstitions, a fact she never failed to mention when she had anything of a mysterious nature to communicate, the number of dreams and presentiments she had in regard to this visit was remarkable, and they all tended to throw doubt on the probability of her darlings' return.

"Why, we came back when we were children," said Kate one evening, when the old woman was unusually depressed, "and it was just as far to grandfather's then as it is now. It's because you're getting old and rheumatic that you feel so blue about us, Aunt Milly."

But Milly sighed as she shook her head. "It was different in those days, honey," she said. "You couldn't help comin' back to your ole mammy when you were chil'en. But you're older now, an' a mighty good looking pair o' girls, if I do say it, an' there's no tellin' what may happen when you get to gallivantin' roun' with the young men in your mother's country."

"Now, Aunt Milly," laughed Kate, "you've always pretended to think we're only children still, and all at once you talk as if we were grown-up young ladies. It's no such thing. Besides," she added cunningly, "didn't we come back safe and sound from Kentucky last year? And you know there are no young men anywhere to hold a candle with those down there."

"That's a fac', honey," said Aunt Milly, lifting her head. "The ole Kentucky stock don't have to knock under yet, if some things is changed."

"Trust Milly to stand up for her own country," laughed Dr. Northmore, who had paused in his passage through the kitchen, and caught the last remark.

"And me for mine, papa," cried Kate. "I shall always like it better than any other. I know I shall."

Apparently he did not disapprove the sentiment, but he added warningly, "Well, make it big enough." And then he took her away with him to join the family conclave in talking over the proposed journey.

They were small travellers, the Northmores, and the excursions from home had of late years been short. The length of the one about to be taken impressed them all. Mrs. Northmore spoke of it with manifest anxiety, and the doctor spent much time poring over the railroad guide and time-table. It was a work which, in spite of its fascination, harassed him, and he alternated between the exasperated opinion that it was impossible for any man not inspired to understand its vexatious figures, and a disposition to combat with vehemence any one who reached a conclusion different from his own on a single point. By this time the course of the journey had been fully decided on. There would be but one change of cars, and this had been hedged about with so much of explanation and admonition that no two girls of average sense could possibly go wrong.

The day came at last, and a perfect day it was, when they started off. The doctor and Virgie accompanied them to the station, but Mrs. Northmore preferred to say the last word quietly at home. There was a crowd

of young people gathered at the station, but the time for good-bys was brief. The through train for the East was not a moment behind time. There was a short impatient stop of the iron steed, a sudden crowding together for hurried farewells, then two flushed faces, half smiling, half tearful, pressed against the window, and the great wheels were in motion again and the travellers on their way.

They drew a long breath as they settled fairly into their seats. "I'm glad that part of it's over," said Kate.

"So am I," said Esther; and then she added: "I'm glad we don't get there right away. It's nice to have an interlude between the acts."

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE OLD PLACE.

THE journey to New England was more than a mere interlude for the girls. It was a distinct pleasure in itself. To watch the low, rich landscape which had lain around them from their infancy change imperceptibly to one different and bolder; the broad fields narrowing; the long, rolling swells lifting into clear-cut hills; the forests of beech and oak, with smooth, sunlighted floors, giving place to woods filled with a bewitching tangle of vines and ferns — all this was a constant delight to travellers as fresh and unsated as ours.

"I like the wide, open stretches better," said Kate once, when they were winding with many turns between the close-set hills. But Esther did not assent to this. It seemed to her that nature had heaped the measure of her bounty here, — the bounty which is beauty, — not spread it out in even level, and something in her heart responded to the change.

The hills had sharpened to a rugged sternness, the

fields were checkered off in little plots by lines of gray stone walls, plots in which men were gathering hay behind oxen instead of horses, when at last they reached the village of Esterly.

They had passed a succession of such villages, catching just a glimpse of pretty homes and shaded streets, with always a spire or two lifted above them, — an endless number it seemed to the girls, — but this was the name for which they had been breathlessly waiting, and it was no sooner spoken than they rose unsteadily in their places and turned their faces toward the door.

"They'll be here, of course. I only hope we shall know them," murmured Esther, anxiously.

She need have had no fear. Aside from some functionaries of the station there were but two persons on the platform of the Esterly depot when the Western train drew in, and these two were unmistakable. One of them was an old man, leaning eagerly forward, with his hands clasped on the top of his cane; a small, spare man, with clean-shaven face, and a touch of ruddy color in his cheeks, hair but slightly gray, and bright blue eyes which searched the faces before him without the aid of spectacles. The other was a petite young lady, in a stylish dress, with a mist of golden hair about her face, and a hat, which seemed to belong

exactly with the face, tied in a gauzy mesh of something under her chin. She did not look in the least like a goddess, she was too slight and genteel; but she was clearly Stella Saxon.

"Grandfather! Stella!" came from the one side in a moment, and "Girls! Girls!" from the other, as the four met and embraced.

"We knew somebody would be here to meet us," said Esther, when they had taken another breath and a good look at each other; "but I'd no idea it would be you, grandfather."

"Hm," said the old gentleman, evidently enjoying her surprise. "Mebbe you thought I'd be propped up in a big chair waiting for you at the house."

"If you knew the state of mind he's been in since morning!" said Stella. "We got Uncle Doctor's telegram early, saying you'd be here on this train, and grandfather seemed to regard it as a summons to start for you at once. Mother and I had hard work to hold him back at all, and in spite of us he would start an hour before time this afternoon; actually hurried his horse to get here, too," she added, glancing with a little grimace at the fattest of family horses which was standing before the two-seated carriage at the side of the depot. "I shudder to think what would have happened to him if you hadn't come."

She was saying this last to Esther privately. The old gentleman had started briskly off with Kate to look after the trunks. These were to follow to the farm in a spring wagon, and securing them was a matter involving so little delay at this quiet station that the four were very shortly on their way behind the gray nag, which, after receiving an admonishing "cluck" at starting off, was allowed to settle to his own jog-trot without further attention. They made a long circuit through the main street of the village, the old gentleman bowing and smiling to every one he met, and obviously eager to attract attention. But as the houses grew more scattering he laid the reins across his lap, put on a pair of spectacles, and for a full minute gazed through them steadily at his granddaughters.

"You look as your mother did at your age; wonderfully like," he said, with his eyes on Esther's face, "and you, too, but not so much," he added more slowly, turning to Kate. He took off his spectacles and returned them to an old-fashioned steel case; then asked, with much deliberation, "And what do you think of your old grandfather?"

"Why, you look just as I thought you did, only so very much younger," replied Esther. "I'd no idea you were so strong and active." She paused

an instant, then, with a charming eagerness in her voice, added: "You make me think of the 'Farmer of Tilsbury Vale.' You know the poem says, —

> "'His bright eyes look brighter, set off by the streak
> Of the unfaded rose that still blooms on his cheek.'"

The old gentleman made no attempt to conceal his elation. He fairly beamed; and Stella murmured in Esther's ear: "You've done it! His youthful looks are his particular vanity; and to have a fresh quotation brought to bear upon the subject!" She lifted her hands as if in despair of expressing the effect on her grandfather, and settled back in her seat. He had turned to Kate and was plainly waiting for her to speak now.

"Well," said that young lady, regarding him with cheerful scrutiny, "I can't quote any poetry about it. It's always Esther who puts in the fine strokes with that sort of thing; but I must say I think you look mighty young for a man of your age."

In its way this was equally good. Ruel Saxon evidently considered that she had used a very strong expression.

"Well," he said with complacence, "I guess there ain't much doubt but what I do bear my age better 'n most men at my time of life. I guess I'm some

like Moses about that. You know it says, 'his eye was not dim nor his natural force abated,' when he got to be a very old man."

There was such evident surprise on the part of his granddaughters at this remark that he added: "To be sure, Moses was a good deal older 'n I am; he was a hundred and twenty years old when that was said of him, and I hain't got to *that* yet by considerable. But I'm past the time of life that most men get to, a good deal past. I was born in the year seventeen hundred and ninety-one, and if I live till the twenty-first day of next June I shall be eighty-nine years old."

He paused to let the statement take full effect, and Stella remarked: "That's the way grandfather always tells his age. He names that year, away back in the last century, and then he tells what his birthday next year will make him. I don't mind his keeping account for himself that way, but he has the same style of reckoning for the rest of us."

"Well," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes, "the women would forget their own ages if it warn't for me and the big Bible. Now Stella here was born in the year — "

"There," cried the girl, "what did I tell you! And isn't it enough to make one feel ancient, the way he

rolls out the syllables? Never you mind about me, grandfather. Tell the girls when they were born. I'm sure they've forgotten."

They admitted the fact promptly, but he had not yet exhausted the subject of his own exceptional fortune in withstanding the ravages of age. It was a theme of which he was never weary, largely no doubt from a certain vanity, which time had spared to him in a somewhat unusual measure, along with his physical powers. To have a fresh and interested audience was inspiration enough.

"It's a great blessing to retain one's faculties in old age," he said impressively. "Now I enjoy life, for aught I know, pretty near as much as I ever did; but it ain't so with everybody. There was Barzillai, for instance. He was a younger man, by eight years, than I am, but he must have been terrible hard of hearing, by his own account, and he'd lost his taste so that there warn't any flavor to him in the victuals he ate; though he seems to have been an active enough man in some ways," he added reflectively.

There was a moment's pause during which Deacon Saxon doubtless mused upon his own mercies, and his granddaughters pondered the question, who the unfortunate octogenarian whom he had just mentioned might

be. Esther could not remember ever hearing of any relative of that name, and it hardly seemed to have a local flavor. She was glad when Kate, who seldom remained ignorant for want of asking a question, inquired briskly: —

"Who was this Bar — what's his name, that you're talking about?"

"Who was Barzillai?" cried the old man, turning upon the girl an astonished countenance. "Hain't you never heard of Barzillai, the Gileadite, the man who went down to give sustenance to David when he was fleeing before Absalom? Don't you know about *that*, and how David afterwards wanted to take him up to Jerusalem with him, but Barzillai said he was too old, and asked the king to let him stay in his own place? Hain't you read about *him?* Well, I never!"

He paused as in speechless wonder, then ejaculated: "When your mother was your age she could have told all about him and anybody else you could mention out of the Bible. What on airth is she doing that she hain't trained you up to know about it? I hope she hain't stopped reading the scriptures herself, living out there in the West."

"Oh, dear!" cried Kate, quite overwhelmed by this burst, and in her jealousy for her mother indifferent for the moment to the insinuation against her native

section. "Mother knows more about the Bible than anybody I ever saw, — except you, — and I've no doubt she told us all about that man when we were little" (she made no attempt now at his name), "but I never could remember those Old Testament folks."

It is doubtful whether Ruel Saxon felt much reassured as to the training his daughter had given her children by the cheerful manner in which Kate made the last admission. For himself his delight in those "Old Testament folks" was perennial. He had pored over their histories till every incident of their lives was as familiar to him as that of his own neighbors. He had entered so intimately into the thoughts and experiences of those ancient worthies that it was no meaningless phrase when, in his daily prayers, he asked that he might "sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven."

Ruel Saxon was a type of that class of men, passing away now even from the hills of New England, who from infancy were so steeped in knowledge of the Bible that its incidents formed the very background of their daily thinking, and its language colored their common conversation. It must be confessed that in the Old Testament he found his keenest pleasure, but between the covers of the Old or New there was no spot which was not to him revered and familiar

ground. That all scripture was given by inspiration of God, and was "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, and for instruction in righteousness," was a part of his creed on which no shadow of doubt had ever fallen. The doctrine, according to his lights, he maintained with unction; the instruction he counted himself well qualified to give; and the reproof he felt equally called to administer on all needful occasions.

It was some minutes before he could quite recover from the astonishment of finding himself the direct progenitor of two young people who knew nothing of that worthy Gileadite whose state in old age formed such a striking contrast to his own. Probably he would have delivered a little homily, then and there, on the importance of reading the Bible, had not a turn in the road at the top of a long steep hill brought them suddenly into sight of the old Saxon homestead.

"There 'tis! There's the old place! Should you know it?" he demanded of his granddaughters.

Esther leaned forward from the back seat where she was sitting with Stella and gazed for a moment, almost holding her breath. Then she lifted a pair of moist shining eyes to her grandfather. "I should know it anywhere," she said, with a thrill in her voice. "It looks just as I have dreamed of it all these years."

Indeed it was a picture which might easily hold its

place in a loving memory; an old white house, with a wide stone chimney rising in the middle of a square old-fashioned roof, standing in the shelter of a cluster of elms, so tall, so noble, and so gracious in their bearing that the special guardianship of Heaven seemed resting on the spot.

Kate had been looking at it steadily too, but she shook her head as she glanced away. "No," she said, "I shouldn't know that I'd ever seen it before; but if you had handed me the reins, grandfather, and told me to find it somewhere on this road, I don't think I should have turned in at the wrong place."

They talked of nothing else as they drove slowly toward it. The motion Ruel Saxon had made — a most unusual one — to apply the lash to Dobbin had been checked by Esther, who declared she wanted to take in the details one by one, and begged him, with feeling, not to go too fast, a request which threw Stella into a state of inward convulsion from which she barely recovered in time to prevent the old gentleman from monopolizing the whole distance with an account of the various improvements he had made on the house, notably the last shingling and the raising of the door-sills.

"You might tell the girls how you *didn't* change the windows," she said slyly; but if he was inclined to do this, Esther's exclamation just then prevented.

"Oh, those dear little old-fashioned windows!" she cried. "They're blinking in the sunshine just as they used to. Grandfather dear, I'm so glad you haven't had them changed into something different."

He winced a little at this, and Stella said magnanimously, "It was really my mother's idea. She does complain sometimes of the trouble it is to keep all those tiny little window-panes clean, and so grandfather thought one spring that he'd have some new sashes put in, with a single pane of glass above and below. They had it all fixed up between them, but I came home just in time to prevent." She gave a shudder, then added: "I've always believed in special providences since then. Why, the change would have been ruinous, simply ruinous! You know if you can't have a lovely new house with everything graceful and artistic, the next best thing is to have one that's old and quaint. I wouldn't have a thing changed about our house for any consideration. I've set my foot down about that." (With all her daintiness she looked as if she could do it with effect.) "But mother and grandfather understand now, and have given their solemn promise never to make the smallest alteration without consulting me."

The old gentleman had been listening to this with his mouth pulled down to an expression of resignation

which was clearly not natural to him. "Well," he said, when she had reached her triumphant conclusion, "I've always been of the opinion that it's best to let women-folks have their way about things in the house. It pacifies 'em, and makes 'em willing to let the men manage things of more consequence. You know Solomon says 'it is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a contentious woman.'"

"That's a fact, grandfather," said Stella, cordially; "and there's no describing how contentious I should be if you set about changing this old house."

They had almost reached it now. A minute more carried them under the elms, straight to the door. It was open, and under the latticed porch, covered with honeysuckles on one side and bitter-sweet on the other, stood Aunt Elsie waiting to receive them. She was a delicate-looking woman, whose quality, as one read it at first glance, was distinctly that of a lady. That she was somewhat precise and old-fashioned came next, in spite of the graceful French twist in her hair and her pretty lavender dress. She kept her place under the lattice, the color rising slightly in her thin cheeks as the girls came up, and her manner of greeting them, though affectionate, had none of the eager warmth of the earlier meeting.

Aunt Elsie Saxon, beside her vivacious daughter, or

her still more sprightly father-in-law, seemed a singularly colorless person, but her quiet unresponsive manner covered a stronger individuality than appeared. The war had made her a widow at the very beginning of the struggle. In the bereavement of those first days she had come with her children to the old home for the help and comfort she sorely needed, but the time never came when she could be spared to leave it. And now for many years she had been mistress of the house, bearing with the somewhat erratic humors of Ruel Saxon as a more impulsive woman could hardly have done, and consoled, no doubt, for much that was trying by the certain knowledge that in his heart he loved and leaned upon her.

There was one other member of the family circle, Tom, the sixteen-year-old boy, but he, it appeared, had some pressing duty in the field. At least he did not show himself till supper time, and then he slipped in with the hired man, who, as well as himself, was duly introduced to the cousins. He was a shy, awkward fellow, with a freckled face, and a pair of shrewd observant eyes, in whose glance Kate thought she detected a lurking disdain for the society of girls. She wanted to begin making his acquaintance at once, — by way of punishment, of course, — but his seat was too far from hers at the table, and he was off like a flash when the meal was over.

It seemed to both the girls that this was the longest day they had ever known, but its hours did not outlast the pleasure they brought. Esther could not rest till she had rambled about the place to find the old familiar things, and her delight, as she came upon one after another, knew no bounds. There was the cherry tree, almost strangled by the grape-vine which hung around it in a thick green canopy, under which she had done miniature housekeeping in those childish days, and a fragment of old blue china, trodden in the ground, was a find to bring a joy like that of relic-hunters in Assyrian mounds, when they come upon some mighty treasure.

"It was a part of our best tea-set, Stella," she cried. "Don't you remember how I broke one of grandmother's company plates by accident, and after mourning over it a little in her gentle way, she gave us the pieces to play with, so I shouldn't feel too badly?" She wiped the bit on her lace-edged handkerchief and held it for a moment lovingly against her cheek.

There was the bunch of striped grass, growing still at the corner of the garden, and she felt a childish impulse to throw herself on the ground beside it, and hunt, as she used to, for two of the long silky spears which would exactly match. She had never quite done it in the old days. Perhaps she could find them now. She

peered up into the tallest of the elms and shouted for joy to find the nest of a fire hangbird swinging just as it used to among the long, lithe branches. She made her way straight to the tree where the pound sweetings grew, and laughed to find that it bore them still, large and golden as ever.

And here again a childish memory came back with a rippling delight over the years that were past. "Do you remember how I tore my dress one day, climbing that tree to get apples?" she appealed to Stella. "I could never bring enough down in my pocket, and if I took a basket up it was sure to spill and the chickens to peck the apples before I got down. One day I gave my dress a horrible tear going up. It scared me at first, and then it dawned upon me, What a place for apples! It was a woollen dress and the skirt was lined. I used that hole for a pocket, and filled the skirt full. It's a wonder I wasn't dragged from the tree by the weight of it. The gathers were dragged from the belt, I remember that perfectly, and how grandmother looked when I went in to share the booty with her," she added, laughing.

Oh, it was pleasant, this wandering over the old place, the finding and remembering!

It was really inside the house that things were most changed; but this, as Stella explained, was really a re-

turn to the way they rightly belonged. Much of the furniture which Esther remembered as crowding the dusky garret had come down, and some which her grandmother had rejoiced in as new and handsome had taken its place there. The haircloth sofa and chairs over which she had slipped and slidden in her youthful days had given place to an oak settle and chairs which, in spite of their old-fashioned shape, were roomy and comfortable. One, a delicious old sleepy hollow, covered with the quaintest of chintz, stood in the corner which had been the grandmother's, and the little, round light-stand was beside it, with the leather-covered Bible smooth as glass, and the candlestick and snuffers, as if she still might sit there of an evening to read.

"Grandfather himself prefers a lamp," Stella remarked, in passing; "he says he's got past tallow dips, but out of respect to grandmother's memory — I impressed that on him strongly — he lets me keep the stand just as she used it."

She certainly had a genius for restoring the old, and doing it with an art which threw all its stiffness into graceful lines. The fireplace in the sitting room, which had been boarded up in Esther's day, with a sheet-iron stove in front of it, was open now, and the old brass andirons shone at the front. The old bricks

had been cracked with age, but they had been replaced by some blue Dutch tilings representing Bible scenes, which gave the whole a charmingly quaint effect.

"It came high," Stella said to Esther, who hung on every word of explanation, "and I didn't know for a while as I should get what I wanted. There was a Colonial tile that would have been perfect, but grandfather wouldn't hear of it. Then all at once I lighted on this in a shop in Boston, and I knew the deed was done. Grandfather fell a victim to my account of the pictures, and I couldn't get them quick enough to suit him. I consider that fireplace my greatest triumph."

The house was really a succession of them. It was only at the pictures on the walls that the girl's desire to restore the old had stopped. "If there had only been some fine old family portraits!" she said mournfully. "But there weren't. I suppose our ancestors never had any money to spend for that sort of thing. There was positively nothing but some wretched prints, and one oil painting that grandmother saved her egg-money for months to buy; hideous thing, quite on the order of those that are advertised nowadays, 'Picture painted while you wait.' I had to banish them all. There was no other way. But I found some of grandmother's dear old samplers tucked away

in the drawers, and I pinned them up around to take the edge off the other things."

"The other things" were some of them her own, and they mingled on the walls with photographs of foreign scenes, and here and there an etching with a name pencilled in the corner, to which she called attention as they passed, with the air of one confident of impressing the beholder.

"Oh, I've picked up a few good things in the course of my travels," she said, after one of Esther's bursts of admiration. "I'll defy anybody to make a better showing than I with the amount I've spent. Mother thinks I've spent too much; but it's my only extravagance, positively my only one, and you have to let yourself out in some direction. It's all that makes saving worth while."

She seemed to have no vanity about her own work, but there was one bit of it before which Esther paused with a long delight, turning back from famous Madonnas again and again to gaze at it.

It was a picture of a sweet old face, framed in a grandmother's cap, very softly done in crayon, and it hung above the little stand in the corner. Below it, pinned carefully on the wall, was an old, old sampler, and the faded letters at the top spelled, "Roxana Fuller, aged eleven." It was a deft hand, though so

young, that had wrought it. There was exquisite needlework in the flowing border, and in the slender maidens at the centre, clasping hands under a weeping willow, above the lines: —

"When ye ſummers all are fled,
When ye waſting lamp is dead,
Where immortal ſpirits reign,
There may we two meet again."

Why these two sweet creatures, evidently in the bloom of life, should have been consoling themselves with this pensive sentiment it was hard to see; but a consolation it may have been to the poor little artist who achieved them to think of Elysian fields where teachers should cease from troubling and samplers be no more.

It had grown dark in the house, too dark for any more searching of its treasures, when the two girls at last sat quietly down in the old south doorway. "If grandmother were only here it would all be perfect," said Esther, with a long, soft sigh. "Somehow it seems strange that she should be gone, and everything else just as it used to be. I had no idea I should miss her so."

"I always miss her when I sit in this doorway in the evening," said Stella. "It was her favorite place. She was so feeble in those last years that she seldom

got beyond the threshold, but she said there was always some pleasant smell or sound coming in to find her. You ought to have seen her here in the spring. The door was always boarded up in the winter, with a bank across the threshold to keep out the cold, and she was so happy when it was opened. I used to tell her when the frogs began to peep, and she would listen and smile, and say it seemed to her their voices were softer than they used to be. Dear heart, she was so deaf in those days that I really suppose she only heard them singing in her memory, but it was all the same to her.

"Yes, it was all the same," she repeated musingly, "and just as real, though grandfather used to argue with her sometimes that a person who couldn't hear her own name across the room couldn't hear frogs peeping at a quarter of a mile. And she would admit it sometimes in a humble way, but she always forgot it, and enjoyed the singing just the same the next evening."

"She wasn't a bit like grandfather, was she?" asked Esther. She wanted Stella to keep on talking about this sweet old grandmother, whom she herself had known only in a brief childish way.

"Oh, dear, no," said Stella; "there couldn't be two people more unlike. She never talked of herself, and she never quoted scripture unless it was one of

the promises. Grandfather always lorded it over her in a way, and she was so frail toward the last that he did it more than ever. If the least thing ailed her he thought she was going to die right off, and he always felt it his duty to tell her that she was a very sick woman, and that it would not be surprising if she were drawing near her end."

She made a soft gurgling in her throat, then went on.

"But that never worried grandmother a bit. She always said she was willing to go if 'twas the Lord's will; but, do you know, in her heart she really expected to outlive him! She told me so once confidentially, and explained, in her perfectly sweet way, that she knew how to manage him better than any one else, and she was afraid it would be a little hard for us to get along with him if she were gone. She said it had been a subject of prayer with her for years, and she had faith that her prayer would be answered."

She paused, and Esther said gravely: "But she did die before him, after all. I wonder what she thought about her prayer then." Stella shook her head. "I don't know," she said; "I imagine she didn't think of it at all, but only that God wanted her. It would have been just like her."

Esther did not speak for a minute. She was pondering her grandmother's case, while the crickets in

the grass filled the stillness with their chirping, and the long, clear call of a whippoorwill sounded from the woods. Presently she asked, "Did she know at the last that she was really going to die?"

"I think she did," said Stella. "I've always felt sure she did, though no one else feels just as I do about it."

She clasped her hands about her knees, and a graver note than usual crept into her musical voice, as she went on. "There was something like a paralytic stroke toward the end, and after that she never got up, but lay in bed, not suffering any pain, but only growing weaker every day. I was with her a great deal, and there never was any one easier to take care of. One morning I was watering the flowers in her window and I saw a cluster of buds, that were almost blown, on her tea rose. She was passionately fond of flowers, and that rose was a special favorite, though it blossomed so seldom that any one else would have lost all patience with it. I knew how pleased she would be, so I took it over to her bed. 'Grandmother,' I said, 'there are some buds on your tea rose; it'll be in bloom in a day or two.' If you could have seen how her face lighted up! 'Why, why,' she said, 'my tea rose!' And then she put out her hands all of a tremble, as if she couldn't believe

it without touching. I guided her dear old fingers, and she moved them over the bush as gently as if it had been a baby's face. 'Oh,' she said, 'it has blossomed so many times when something beautiful happened! Somehow, it seemed to know. It blossomed when Lucia was married, and the day your mother came home to live with you children; but I never thought it would be so now. A day or two, did you say; only a day or two more?' And then she closed her eyes with such a smile, and I heard her saying softly to herself, —

> "'There everlasting spring abides,
> And never-withering flowers.'

"Her mind wandered a little all that day and the next, and she never once spoke of leaving us, but she slipped away at night as quietly as going to sleep, and in the morning the rose was in bloom. I told grandfather about it afterward, but he didn't attach any significance to it at all. In fact, I think he felt a little mortified, and he said if she had realized that she was on the brink of eternity she wouldn't have been thinking about a rose."

She was silent a minute, then added: "In one way I don't know but grandmother's prayer was answered after all, for grandfather seemed different after her

death. He has been more considerate of us all, and we — yes, I guess we've tried harder to be good to him. We couldn't help it when we remembered how patient she always was."

The chirping of the crickets seemed to grow fuller and gladder in the summer stillness, and the notes of the whippoorwill came with yet mellower call. It was as if the influence of a sweet, unselfish, loving spirit filled the place, and somehow it did not seem to Esther Northmore at that moment a poor or paltry thing to have lived and died one of the common throng.

CHAPTER V.

AUNT KATHARINE SAXON.

IN the privacy of their room that night Kate confided to Esther two resolutions. The first was that she would not again, during her stay at her grandfather's, needlessly expose her ignorance of any point of Bible history: "For if we're going to get mother into disgrace, and make him think she never taught us anything about it, it'll be a pretty business," she ended with feeling.

To this Esther gave cordial assent, but she was not so sure of Kate's wisdom in the other matter; for the girl, with her usual penetration, had guessed that the Eastern relatives held a somewhat exalted opinion of the superiority of New England to the rest of the United States, and announced her intention of correcting it to the best of her ability. Esther, whose loyalty to her own section was not of a combative sort, suggested mildly that people's opinions about things didn't alter them, and that the grandfather, at his advanced age, should at least be left to the

enjoyment of any prejudices he might have in favor of his native section.

But the allusion to his age should have been omitted. Kate shook her head at this, and declared that he of all others was the one not to be spared. Was it not his pride and boast that time had not robbed him of either mental or physical vigor? No, no; she should not hold herself debarred from supplying him with new ideas on any subject. It was only when he stood on Bible ground that she should let him alone.

It was evident the next morning that on this ground he did not intend to let her alone, for at family prayers he read the pathetic story of David's flight from his unworthy son, and his eyes sought hers for a moment with pointed meaning as he paused on the name of the loyal friend whose swift generosity remembered the fugitives, "hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness," and who of good right met them again with rejoicing in their hour of victory.

The quaint old story held the girl's absorbed attention to the end. She wished it were longer, and told her grandfather so after breakfast, adding that the way he read the Old Testament made it more interesting than common.

He received the compliment with complacence.

"Well," he said, "I guess I do read it better than some folks. I guess I'm a little like those men in the days of Ezra the scribe, who stood up before the people, and 'read in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand.'"

Kate privately wondered how many more people in the Bible her grandfather resembled, but she refrained from suggesting the query, lest he should claim her attention at once for the whole list.

It was while they sat at table that morning that he said, looking at her with the sudden lighting of face which marks a mental discovery: "It's your great-aunt Katharine that you put me in mind of. I knew there was somebody. It ain't your looks so much; but a way you have."

"Oh, grandfather, how can you?" cried Stella. "Kate, you won't thank him much for that when you know Aunt Katharine."

"She's the one I was named for, I suppose," said Kate. "I've heard mother tell about her. Well, if she's disagreeable, there won't be any love lost between us on account of the name. I never did like it particularly."

"Disagreeable!" cried Stella, "why, she's the queerest, most cross-grained, cantankerous —"

"Stella! Stella!" said her mother, severely. "Why

will you prejudice your cousins against your poor Aunt Katharine?"

"My poor Aunt Katharine will do it herself quick enough," said Stella. "Oh, yes," she added with a little shrug, as she saw her mother's lips parting again, "my mother's going to tell you that Aunt Katharine has had a great deal in her life to try her, and that she is really a remarkably bright and capable woman. It's perfectly true; and several other things are true besides."

"The trouble with my sister Katharine," said Ruel Saxon, setting down his cup of tea, which he had been drinking so hot that every swallow was accompanied by an upward jerk of the head and a facial contortion, "the trouble with Katharine Saxon don't lay in her nat'ral faculties. It lays in a stiff-necked and perverse disposition. When she gets a notion into her head she won't change it for anybody, and she's wiser in her own conceit than 'seven men that can render a reason.'"

"Grandfather himself frequently personates the whole seven," observed Stella, with a nod at her cousins. She smiled, as if the memory of some past scenes amused her, then said soberly: "The fact of it is, Aunt Katharine is a regular crank. There's nothing in this world that goes right according to her

notion of it, but she's particularly down on the ways of the men. She *would* have a little patience with women — for she thinks their faults are mostly due to their being so down-trodden — if they only wouldn't marry. I've heard her say so! She never married herself, you know, and she has an awfully poor opinion of the whole institution."

Ruel Saxon looked as if he had a word to offer at this point in regard to his sister's matrimonial opinions, but Aunt Elsie was before him. "Now, don't you think," she said, looking gravely at Stella, and incidentally including him in the passing glance, "that we'd better let the girls form their own impressions of Aunt Katharine? They may like her a great deal better than you do, Stella."

"I'm sure I'm willing," said the girl, with another shrug, and her grandfather, after wrestling with a little more extremely hot tea, seemed to be willing too; but he suggested that the girls should make an early call on their Aunt Katharine. It would give them a chance of forming the desired impressions, and besides she would expect it.

The girls accepted the suggestion promptly. Indeed Kate, whose interest in her namesake had been considerably whetted by what had been said of her, proposed that they should go that very morning; but

to this Aunt Elsie's judgment was again opposed. It seemed that Aunt Katharine had a special dislike to being interrupted in her morning duties by callers, and was disposed to think slightingly of people who hadn't "work enough to keep them at home in the fore part of the day." In the case of her nieces, who must certainly be excused for being at leisure, she might waive the last objection, but it was best to be on the safe side.

It was settled that the girls, accompanied by their grandfather, should go that afternoon, and if the call had been upon some distinguished person they could not have taken more pains with their toilets. Esther debated between three gowns, and finally settled on a soft gray, with plain white cuffs and collar, while Kate put on a pretty lawn and the dashing Roman sash which had been Aunt Milly's parting gift.

It was less than a half hour's walk across the fields to Aunt Katharine's house, but the grandfather had decided to go by the road in state, and had Dobbin and the two-seated carriage at the door in good time. He had taken a little more pains than usual with his own appearance, and his daughter-in-law added the last touches with careful hand.

She was not much inclined to the giving of gratui-

tous advice; but, in the absence of the young people from the room, she did say, persuasively, as she adjusted the old gentleman's cravat: "If I were you, father, I'd try not to get into one of those discussions to-day with Aunt Katharine. We want the girls to have as pleasant an opinion of her as possible, and you know she always appears at a disadvantage when she's arguing with you."

Sly Aunt Elsie! There were moments when the wisdom of the serpent was as nothing to hers. Ruel Saxon twisted his neck for a moment impatiently in his cravat, then replied meekly: "Well, I s'pose it does kind of put her out to have me always get the better of her. Katharine has her good p'ints as well as anybody, and I'd be glad to have Lucia's children see 'em. If she don't rile me up too much I'll — yes, I'll try to bear with her this afternoon. Solomon says there's a time for everything: a time to keep silence and a time to speak; and mebbe it's a time to keep silence to-day."

In this accommodating frame of mind he started off with his granddaughters. Stella had declined an invitation to accompany them — possibly at her mother's suggestion — though the fact that the way lay along one of her favorite drives, the old county road, had been something of an inducement to go.

It was one of those dear old roads, familiar in every part of New England, through which the main business of the region, now diverted to other highways, once took its daily course, but which, as its importance dwindled, had gained in every roadside charm. The woods, sweet with all summer odors, had crept close to its edge; daisies and ferns encroached on its borders, and its wavy line made gracious curve for the rock which had rolled from the hill above and lay beside it still, a moss-covered perch for children and squirrels. Here, the birds, not startled too often in their secret haunts, tilted on sprays of the feathery sumach, finishing their songs with confident clearness as the traveller drew near, and the swift brown lizards darted across the way before the very wheels of his carriage.

Miss Katharine Saxon's farm was one of those which still had contact with the world through this deserted highway, but its comparative isolation had not affected its well-kept appearance. The house was white, with green blinds at the front and sides, but presented a red end to the fields behind, after the fashion of many in that section. The dooryard, a small rectangle, was shut off from the surrounding pastures by a high picket fence, though there were no shrubs, or even a flower-bed, inside the enclosure.

The owner was not visible at any of the windows as her guests walked up the gravel path, which was too narrow to admit of their advancing in any but single file, but the brass knocker had scarcely fallen before she opened the door in person.

Even Esther had no remembrance of having seen her before, but there could be no doubt of her identity. In feature she was singularly like her brother, but her small thin figure was not trim and straight like his. She was so painfully bent as plainly to need the aid of the stout oak stick on which she leaned, and her hair, in striking contrast with his, was snowy white. She greeted her nieces with as little effusion as their Aunt Elsie, but her quick bright eyes betrayed a much keener interest as they darted sharply from one to the other.

"Well, Ruel, I s'pose you're feeling just as smart as ever to-day, and just as able to bless the Lord that you ain't as the rest of us are. Thank you, my rheumatism ain't a mite better 'n 'twas the last time you was here, and my sight and hearing are mebbe a little grain worse."

She delivered herself of this with surprising rapidity as she walked before them into the parlor, looking back with short quick glances at her brother. He responded by a rather discomfited grunt. Evi-

"SHE OPENED THE DOOR IN PERSON."

dently she had the start of him. The parlor was of the primmest New England type, and so dark that for some moments the girls, sitting uncomfortably on straight-backed chairs whose hard stuffed seats seemed never before to have been pressed by a human figure, could scarcely make out what manner of place they had entered. It dawned on them by degrees, and if anything had been needed to enhance the charm of the parlor at the old homestead, the necessary contrast would certainly have been furnished here.

There was nothing to suggest that any of the ordinary occupations of human life had ever been carried on in this room. The pictures which Stella had banished would seem to have been dragged from their hiding-places and hung on these walls, and beside them there was nothing of mural ornament except three silver coffin plates framed in oak on a ground of black. The Northmore girls, gazing in wonder at these shining tablets, could scarcely believe that they were really what they seemed, but Stella, to whom they appealed on their return, promptly disabused them of the doubt. Most certainly these sombre ornaments had their original place on the funeral casket. It was not uncommon, she said, to find such relics displayed in old-fashioned houses in this region.

"There were some in our house once," she added, "but I persuaded grandfather to let me lay them away in the best bureau drawers. He objected at first, but after I put up my Madonnas and cathedrals he succumbed. I believe he considered the place unfit to display the names of those who had died in the faith."

But this was afterward. At present Esther was occupied with the strenuous effort to read the names thus honored of Aunt Katharine, and Kate was bending all her energies to discover the points in which she herself resembled that lady. The latter turned upon them now with one of her sharp glances.

"So you're Lucia's girls," she said with deliberation. "Well, you ain't as good looking as she was, neither of you. But handsome is that handsome does; and if you behave yourselves, you'll do."

The girls were somewhat taken aback by this, but Kate rallied in a moment. "You can't hurt our feelings by telling us we aren't as good looking as mother was," she said gayly, "for we know she was a regular beauty. Father's told us that over and over."

"I'll warrant he thought so," chuckled her grandfather, "and he wasn't the only one, neither. Why

all the likeliest young fellows in town came courting your mother. She didn't have to take up with a Western man because she couldn't get anybody nearer home."

"Perhaps it was because she had a chance to compare the Western man with those around here that she *did* take up with him," said Kate, quickly.

It was a fair retort; but the old gentleman's forehead puckered for a moment as if he were not quite prepared for it. Before he could say anything in reply his sister had changed the subject, by asking, in her abrupt way, with her eyes fixed on her younger niece, "What do you think of this country?"

It is the stereotyped question from the old resident to the newcomer in all parts of the world. Perhaps, convenient as it is in bridging over the awkwardness of first acquaintance, it would be oftener omitted if society remembered that dictum of Dr. Johnson's, that no one has a right to put you in such a position that you must either hurt him by telling the truth, or hurt yourself by not telling it. Kate Northmore had never faced the alternative under very crucial conditions, but whatever twinge there might be she preferred on general principles to resign to the other party, and she did so promptly now.

"Well, I can't say I'm very much struck with the

looks of it," she said frankly. "It's different from ours, you know; and these little bits of fields are so funny, all checkered off with stone walls. I haven't got used to them yet."

Miss Saxon looked at her niece without speaking, but the grandfather bristled at this. "Hm!" he grunted, "You Western folks seem to think nothing's of any account unless it's big. 'Taint the size of things, but what you do with 'em, that counts."

"Well, it's a wonder to me what you can do with some of this land of yours, it's so rough and poor," said Kate, lightly. "I don't see how the farmers manage to make a living, scratching round among the rocks." Then, with a good-natured laugh, she added: "Oh, we don't despise the littles, out our way, as much as you think; but when it comes to wheat and corn, and things of that sort, we do like to see a lot of it growing all together. It looks as if there was enough to go round, you know, and makes people feel sort of free and easy."

Perhaps, in his heart, Ruel Saxon doubted whether it was good for people to feel free and easy in this transient mortal state, but he had no chance just then to discuss the moral advantages of large labor and small returns, for Esther exclaimed, with a glance at her sister which was half reproachful:

"But there are so many other things in a country besides the crops! For my part, I think New England is perfectly beautiful. I believe I'm in love with it all."

Miss Katharine Saxon turned her head and looked at the girl attentively. The mother must have been very pretty indeed if she had ever looked prettier than Esther did at that moment. A delicate pink had risen in her cheeks, and her brown eyes seemed unusually soft and lustrous in the warmth with which she had spoken. She had made a lucky suggestion, and her grandfather took his cue instantly.

"We never pretended that our strong p'int was raising wheat 'n' corn here in New England," he said loftily. "The old Bay State can do better than that. She can raise men; men who fear God and honor their country, and can guide her in the hour of need with the spirit of wisdom and sound understanding."

"We've got some of that sort, too," said Kate, cutting in at the first pause. "The only difference is you started on your list a little ahead of us."

But the remark was lost on her grandfather. He was on solid ground now, and he felt his eloquence rising. "You talk about our land being poor. Well, mebbe 'tis; mebbe we do have to scratch round

among the rocks to make a living, but we've scratched lively enough to do it, and support our schools and churches, and start yours into the bargain. We've scratched deep enough to find the money to send lots of our boys to college — there's been a good many of 'em right from this d*e*strict. There was Abner Sickles that went to Harvard from the back side of Rocky Hill, where they used to say the stones were so thick you had to sharpen the sheep's nose to get 'em down to the grass between; there was Baxter Slocum — thirteen children his father had — there were the Dunham boys, three out of six in one family."

For the last minute Miss Katharine Saxon had been moving uneasily in her chair. Her square chin, which had been resting on her clasped hands at the top of her cane, had come up, and her eyes were fixed sharply on her brother.

"While you're about it, Ruel," she said, interrupting him in the dryest of tones, "you might just mention some o' the *girls* that have been sent to college from these old farms."

Ruel Saxon, reined up thus suddenly in the onward charge of his eloquence, opened and closed his lips for a moment with a rather helpless expression. She waited for him to speak, her thin hands gripping the cane, and the corners of her mouth twitching ominously.

"Well, of course, Katharine," he said testily, "there hain't been as many girls. For that matter there warn't the female colleges to send 'em to fifty years ago; but you know yourself there hain't been the means to send 'em both, the boys *and* the girls, and if it couldn't be but one — "

He paused to moisten his lips, and she took up the word with an accent of intense bitterness. "If there couldn't be but one, it must be the boy, of course, — always the boy. Oh, I know! Yes, and I know how the girls 'n' their mothers have slaved to send 'em. It ain't the men that have learned how to get more out of the farms; it's the women that have learned how to get along with less in the house. There was Abner Sickles! Yes, there was; and there was his sister Abigail, too. I went to school with 'em both. She was enough sight smarter 'n he was; always could see into things quicker, 'n' handle 'em better, but they took a notion to send him to college, — wanted to make a minister of him, — and she stopped going to school when she was fourteen, and did the housework for the family, — her mother was always sickly, — and then sat up nights, sewing straw and binding shoes to earn money for Abner." She paused, with a note in her voice which suggested a clutch at the throat, then added: "She died when she was twenty. Went

crazy the last part of the time, and thought she'd committed the unpardonable sin. It's my opinion somebody *had* committed it; but 'twarn't her."

It was the old gentleman who was moving uneasily now. "It was too bad about Abigail," he said, with a shake of the head. "I remember her case, and 'twas one of the strangest we ever had in the church. I went out to see her once, with two of the other deacons, and we set out the doctrine of the unpardonable sin clear and strong, and showed her that if she really *had* committed it she wouldn't be feeling so bad about it — she'd have her conscience seared as with a hot iron; but she couldn't seem to lay hold of any comfort. However, it was plain that her mind wasn't right, and I don't believe the Lord held her responsible for her lack of faith."

The old woman gave an impatient snort. "If he didn't hold somebody responsible, you needn't talk to me about justice," she said fiercely. "I don't know how you and the other deacons figured it out, Ruel, but if it ain't the unpardonable sin for folks to act like fools, when the Lord has given 'em eyes to see with, and sense enough to put two and two together, I don't know what 'tis. I tell you the whole trouble grew out of that notion that a boy must be sent away to school just because he was a boy, and a girl must

be kept at home just because she was a girl. If the Almighty ever meant to have things go that way why didn't He give the men the biggest brains, and put the strongest backs 'n' arms on the women? Heaven knows they've needed 'em."

A good memory was undoubtedly one of Ruel Saxon's strong points, but all recollection of the gentle warning his daughter-in-law had given him was put utterly to flight by this speech of his sister's. He stiffened himself in his chair, and his nostrils dilated (to use a pet figure of his own) "like a war-horse smelling the battle from afar."

"Katharine," he said, "you darken counsel by words without knowledge. I don't pretend, and nobody ever pretended, that Abigail Sickles or' to have worked herself to death to keep Abner in college. Her folks or' to have seen it in time, and stopped her. But you take too much upon yourself when you want to change things round from the way the Lord made 'em. It's the *men* that have got to be at the head of things in church and state; it's the *men* that have got to go out into the world and earn the living for the women and children; and it's because they've needed the education more, and had more call to use it, that the boys have been sent to college instid of the girls. There's reason in all things."

She broke in upon him with a short, scornful laugh. "There's a terrible good reason sometimes, Ruel, why the women have to earn the living for themselves, 'n' the children too; and that's to keep themselves from starving. Who earned the living for Nancy's children when she brought 'em all home to the old house forty years ago? Well, I guess she 'n' I earned most of it."

She lifted her shoulders with an effort, and added: "Shouldn't be quite so near doubled together now if it hadn't been for bending over that spinning-wheel day in 'n' day out, working to get food 'n' clothes for those children, the six of 'em that John Proctor ran away 'n' left. You talk about men going out in the world to earn the living. It would be a good thing for the women to go into the world too, sometimes. Mebbe they wouldn't be quite so helpless then when they're left to shift for themselves."

The old man winced. "You had an awful hard time, Katharine, you 'n' Nancy. John Proctor didn't do his duty by his family," he said; and then he faced her with a fresh impatience. "But that ain't the way the men gener'ly do, is it? To hear you talk a body'd think the women had just naturally got to plan for that sort of thing. You want 'em to go out into the world, like the men, and make a business of it. I'd like to

know who'd take care of the home 'n' the children if they did. Home is the place for women. The Apostle Paul — "

There was a distinct flash of anger now in the small, bright eyes of Miss Katharine Saxon. " Don't tell me what Paul said," she exclaimed. "I tell you that notion o' his, that there was nothing a woman had a right to do but marry, 'n' have children, 'n' tend the house, is at the bottom of half the foolishness there is in the world to-day. Women have just as good a right to pick 'n' choose what they shall do as the men have. And some of 'em had a good deal better do something else than marry the men that want 'em. I tell you Paul didn't know it all. 'Cording to his own account he had to be struck by lightning before he could see some things, and if another streak had come his way mebbe he'd caught sight of a few more that were worth looking at."

Ruel Saxon gazed at his sister for a minute speechless. Then he said solemnly, "Katharine, there *is* such a thing as blasphemy, and I'd be a little careful if I was you how I talked about the Lord's dealings with his saints."

He glanced at his granddaughters as he said it, as if to suggest that their morals, if not his own, might be impaired by such language.

" Laws, Ruel," she said briskly, " I'd somehow got

it into my head that that thing happened to him on the way to Damascus, and I didn't know as you or anybody else called Saul of Tarsus a saint."

She had him at a moment's disadvantage, and the thin, high, mocking laugh with which she ended put the finishing touch to his irritation.

"As the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of a fool," he said, with slow emphasis.

It should be observed in passing that Deacon Saxon's use of the name which he had just bestowed by implication on his sister was, like the text itself, Solomonic. The person lacking, not in knowledge, but in moral sense, was the one whom the wise man called a fool, and there were moments when Katharine Saxon appeared to her brother to be so wanting in this respect as to come fairly under the title. It was not the first time that his frankness had led him to bestow it on her.

"Hey?" she said, leaning forward suddenly, with her hand curled about her ear.

That she had not caught the words was by no means certain. It suited her humor sometimes to offset his boastfulness as to his good hearing with a certain parade of her own slight deafness, and the occasions for making him repeat himself were often cunningly chosen. For once he did not do it. Perhaps, a second time, he remembered the presence of his granddaughters.

As for the girls themselves, they caught their breath, in the silence that followed, with something like a gasp. It is safe to say that they had never been present before at such an interview between relatives. Kate would not have minded a renewal of hostilities, but Esther, with better grace, seized the chance to effect a truce by turning the conversation into a more peaceful channel.

"Aunt Katharine," she said eagerly, "you spoke of the spinning you used to do. Have you the old wheel now? I've heard mother tell what a wonderful spinner you were, and I should so like to see the very wheel you used."

The old woman took her hand from her ear and turned toward the girl. "No," she said, "I hain't got the old wheel now; one of Nancy's girls wanted it, and I let her carry it off. 'Twasn't any account; pretty near as much wore out as I was when it stopped running."

Evidently she felt that her passage-at-arms with her brother was ended. The sharpness of her expression relaxed, and she rose from her place with her ordinary manner. "I can show you a piece of linen your mother wove, if you want to see it. She'd have made a good spinner herself if she'd stuck to it, but I s'pose she forgot all about it long ago. Well, there's plenty

other ways for women to use their time nowadays, and I'm glad of it."

The rest of the call ran smoothly. Miss Saxon could be even gracious when she was so disposed, and she treated her guests to a bottle of raspberry vinegar, which, in spite of the fact that she had brewed it herself, was not in the least too sharp, with fruit cake which time had brought to the most perfect mellowness. Her nieces would have left her house imagining that the "queerness," of which she had given such ample proof, was confined to the one subject which she had discussed with her brother, had it not been for a little episode at the very end of the call, and for this, as it happened, the old gentleman was again responsible.

"How are you getting along with your garden, Katharine?" he asked. "I was thinking mebbe I or' to send Tom down here to do a little weeding for you."

A peculiar smile gleamed suddenly in the eyes of his sister. "Thank ye, Ruel, I've got all the help I need jest now," she said. "Come out 'n' take a look at my garden."

She led the way to the rear of the house, and stepped before them into the trim little garden. It was of the old-fashioned sort, with vegetables growing in thrifty rows, and bunches of such flowers as phlox, sweet william, and bachelor's buttons standing at the

corners of the walks. It would have seemed a model of conventional primness, but for a curious figure seated on a three-legged stool, puffing tobacco smoke from a long Dutch pipe in among the branches of a rose-bush.

He might have been upwards of sixty; a dapper little man with a shining face, and a round head covered as to its top by an embroidered cap adorned with a crimson tassel. His waistcoat was of gay old-fashioned silk, across which was strung a huge gold chain, and a flaming topaz pin adorned the front of his calico shirt. At sight of the company issuing from the house he started from his seat and trotted up the walk to meet them, his hand extended and his face expressive of the most beaming cordiality.

Ruel Saxon, who was following his sister with a meekness of deportment which had sat uneasily upon him ever since the close of their discussion, started as his eye fell on this person, and threw up his head with a movement of surprise and irritation. "Good day, Solomon," he said stiffly, as they came together, Miss Saxon having stepped aside to give free course for the meeting.

"Why, how d'y' do, Deacon, how d'y' do?" exclaimed the other, seizing the old gentleman's hand, which, to tell the truth, had not been offered him, and shaking

it furiously. "It's been a terrible long time since you and I met. I — I was thinkin' the other day I or' to come round and see how you was gittin' along."

The deacon did not look overjoyed at the mention of the intended honor. "How long has Solomon been here?" he asked rather curtly, turning to his sister.

"Two weeks to-morrow," she replied, with equal curtness. Then, turning to the little man, and from him to the girls, she said with marked politeness, "Mr. Ridgeway, these are my nieces, Lucia Saxon's children. I guess you remember her."

The little man pulled the cap from his head, revealing a crown as bald as a baby's, and bowed himself up and down with the fervor of an Oriental. "Lucia Saxon? What, her that married the doctor and went out West? Why, sartin, sartin. She was one of the nicest gals I ever see, and the prettiest spoken. I — I guess your mother must 'av' told you about me," he added eagerly. "I took her home from spellin' school once. She had spelled down everybody but me; but I was older 'n she was, you know, a good deal older." The delight of the remembrance seemed to overcome him, and he hopped first on one foot, then on the other, like an excited child.

Ruel Saxon's face worked curiously while this performance lasted. "I don't see but what your garden truck is getting on all right," he said in the dryest of tones, "and I guess the girls 'n' I'd better be going."

He turned, making his way past the others, regardless of the fact that his footprints were left in the onion-bed which bordered the walk, and headed the line again toward the house.

"I shall write to mother that we have seen you," said Esther, smiling back at the little man, who still stood bowing with his cap in his hands, and Kate gave him a friendly nod, though her mouth was twitching with amusement.

Aunt Katharine said good-by to them at the front door. "If you ever feel like seeing the old woman again, come down," she said to the girls. "'Tain't so very far across the fields, and you can follow the cow-path." Then, without waiting to see them go, she closed the door.

"Grandfather," Kate burst out when they were fairly off, "who in the world is that man, and how does he come to be at Aunt Katharine's?"

"That man," he repeated, deepening his tone with an accent of disgust, "is a poor half-witted cretur that belongs at the poorhouse. He stays there most of the time, but now 'n' then he gets a restless spell

and they let him out. Then he always comes round to your Aunt Katharine's, and she takes him in."

"Well, he's the queerest acting man I ever came across," said Kate, "and how he was dressed out, with his fine flowered vest and his jewellery!"

"'Jewellery!'" grunted her grandfather. "He didn't have on any compared with what he has sometimes. Why, when he really dresses up, that cretur covers himself all over with it."

The girls looked so astonished that he apparently felt it incumbent on him to attempt some explanation of the man. "The fact is," he said, "Solomon Ridgeway is as crazy as a loon on one p'int. He thinks he's rich, though for aught I know he's got as much sense about other things as he ever had. He thinks he's terrible rich, and that the best way to keep his property, as he calls it, is in gold and jewels. He's got a trunkful of it — wo'thless stuff, of course — that he carries with him everywhere. I s'pose it's stowed away somewhere at your Aunt Katharine's now."

Kate really seemed past speaking for a moment, and Esther exclaimed in a tone of utter bewilderment, "Well, I should have thought Aunt Katharine was the last person in the world who would want such a man at her house. What makes her do it?"

"The Lord only knows," said the old gentleman solemnly. And then he jerked the reins and urged Dobbin on his way in a tone of uncommon asperity.

The fact was, the question had a special irritation for him. That his sister, who flouted wise men and scorned the opinions of those having authority, should bear with the vagaries of a being like Solomon Ridgeway was a thing that passed his understanding. With the man himself he *might* have had some patience, though his form of mania was peculiarly exasperating to his own hard common sense, and somehow he could not help resenting it that "Solomon," of all names, should have lighted on so foolish a creature; but that, such as he was, he should be the object of Katharine Saxon's pointed and continuous favor was trying beyond measure to her brother. He lapsed into a silence quite unusual with him, and the girls did not disturb it again on the way home.

They were longing to talk the visit over with Stella, but she was away when they reached the house, and Aunt Elsie asked no questions beyond an inquiry for Aunt Katharine's health. It was at supper that the subject found its way into the family talk, and then Stella, who had just come in, opened it.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed your call on Aunt Katharine," she said, smiling at her cousins.

"Of course we did," said Kate, promptly. "You didn't begin to tell us how interesting she is."

"Oh, but you should have been there on a day when she and grandfather discussed things," said Stella. "That's the time when she really shows her quality." She sent a demure glance at the old gentleman as she spoke. How she had become possessed of his intention to refrain from controversy is not certain, but somehow she had it.

He glanced with obvious embarrassment at his granddaughters. Then he set down his cup of tea, and faced his daughter-in-law. "Elsie," he said, in a tone whose humility was really touching, "I meant to stand by what I said to you. I certainly did; but I couldn't do it." He cleared his throat and his tone grew firmer. "I couldn't do it, and I don't know as I shall be held responsible for it, either. The Bible says, 'As much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men,' — and I s'pose that means women too, — but it don't lie in me, and it never will, to keep my mouth shut while folks are advancing such notions as Katharine did this afternoon. I did contend with her; I certainly did."

The Northmore girls could not keep straight faces, and Stella broke into a delighted giggle. "I'm sure 'twas your duty, grandpa, and I'm glad you did it,"

she said. "What was it this time; woman's rights, or the folly of getting married, or what?"

She glanced at her cousins as she asked the question, and Esther spoke first. "It was education partly, and the question whether women ought not to be as free as men to choose what they shall do. I must say that for my part I thought Aunt Katharine made some real good points, though of course she needn't have been quite so bitter."

"It was my speaking about Abner Sickles that stirred her up to begin with," said the old gentleman, still addressing himself in half-apologetic tone to Aunt Elsie. "That put her in mind of his sister Abigail, and how she worked herself to death helping him through college."

"I shouldn't wonder if helping Abner was the greatest comfort the poor girl had," observed Aunt Elsie.

The unemphatic way in which she sometimes made important suggestions was one of Aunt Elsie's peculiarities. No one spoke for a minute, and she turned the conversation away from Aunt Katharine by suddenly asking a question on a wholly different subject.

CHAPTER VI.

AUNT KATHARINE — CONTINUED.

AFTER supper that evening, as Ruel Saxon sat in his room in the twilight, Esther came softly in and sat down beside him.

"Grandfather," she said, "what made Aunt Katharine so bitter against the men?"

She had been turning the question wonderingly in her thoughts ever since the interview of the afternoon. There was something in the lonely old woman, crabbed of manner and sharp of tongue as she was, which had appealed to her strongly. That she was a unique personality, unlike any one she had seen before, was no doubt a part of it, for Esther loved the striking and picturesque; but there was more than this. She, too, had felt some touch of revolt against the limitations with which custom had hedged the ordinary life of woman, and Aunt Katharine's fierce, uncaring challenge of it all had not been wholly unpleasing to her.

"What made Katharine so bitter against the men?"

repeated her grandfather. He had started at the question, as one does sometimes when called upon suddenly to account for a familiar fact which everyday acquaintance has robbed of all its wonder. "Well, that's a long story, and I don't s'pose anybody but Katharine herself could tell the whole of it; but there were some things all of us knew, and she did have her grievances — there's no doubt but what she had her grievances."

He jerked off his spectacles, through which he had been trying to read a chapter of Proverbs, settled himself in his chair, dropped his chin in his hand, and began: —

"It started just about the time that Nancy came home with her children; Nancy was our sister, you know. There were three of us: Nancy and Katharine and me. Katharine was the youngest, and she was going to be married that spring to Levi Dodge. He was a likely young fellow, as everybody thought, and they'd been keeping company for upward of a year. But when Nancy came home it changed everything. There were those six children to be done for, and Nancy herself all wore out with work 'n' worry, and your grandmother — for I was married then, you know — had her hands more 'n full with the housework and her own children, and it looked

to Katharine as if she'd or' to put off getting married a while and help things along here at home."

"We didn't ask her to, and we didn't so much as know she was thinking of it, till she'd got her mind all made up; but I tell you we were awful glad, and I never shall forget how Nancy and your grandmother cried and hugged her, when she told 'em what she was going to do, right here in this room where you 'n' I be to-night."

He paused, and it seemed to Esther as if the shadows in the dusky room took momentary shape of those three women, young, loving, and in trouble together, who had met there so long ago. Perhaps the old man felt their presence too, for there was a peculiar softness in his voice as he went on: —

"We wouldn't 'a' let her do it, if we'd known how things were coming out, but you see we thought Nancy'd be in a home of her own again inside a year, and then the way'd be open for Katharine 'n' Levi, and of course we thought he'd be reasonable about it. But bless your heart, when she came to talk it over with him he wouldn't give in an inch. He said she'd giv' her promise to him, and she couldn't go back on it; he had more claim on her than John Proctor's family had. Well, of course, I don't know what passed between 'em, — Katharine

never talked it over much, — but she was always high strung, and I guess she gave it to him pretty straight that if he couldn't wait for her a little while under such circumstances he needn't count on having her at all. Anyhow, the upshot of it was he went away mad, and we were dreadful sorry, but we thought he'd get over it in a day or two. He didn't, though. In less 'n a week he was courting Sally Fry, and they two were married on the very day that was set for Katharine's wedding."

"How perfectly abominable!" burst out Esther. "I don't wonder she despises the men if that's the way she was treated."

"She needn't despise 'em all, need she?" said her grandfather, sharply. "There *have* been men that could wait as long as any woman. There was Jacob, for instance. He waited seven years for Rachel, working for a hard man all the time, and the Bible says they seemed like only a few days to him for the love he bore her. And then he worked for her seven years more."

Esther was silent. There was no answer to this case of Jacob, dear old Jacob, a prince indeed, with all his meanness, since he could love like that!

"Do you suppose Aunt Katharine really cared for that man?" she asked after a moment.

"I guess most likely she did," said her grandfather, nodding his head slowly. "She wasn't the kind to say she'd marry a man unless she loved him. But she never made a sound after he left her. She held her head higher than ever, and the way she worked! You'd have thought she had the strength of ten women in her."

He drew his hand reflectively across his chin for a moment, then added: "But somehow I never thought 'twas that affair with Levi that soured your Aunt Katharine as much as it was the way John Proctor acted. It was strange about Proctor. You see, in those days they could put a man in prison for debt, and he had got in debt — not so very deep, only a matter of three or four hundred dollars; but the man he owed it to was threatening to have the law of him if he didn't pay, and there warn't any way John could turn to get that money. There was nothing he could do but get out of the country, and I'm free to confess now that I helped him go.

"You see, we thought if he could once get into Canada, and work at his trade — he was a first-rate carpenter — he could pay off that money in a little while, and I agreed to do what I could for his family while he was gone. We went over everything together, and he talked as fair as a man could, and

then I drove with him one day 'n' night, and the relatives up New Hampshire way gave him a lift when he got there, and between us all he was over the border before folks round here knew he was gone. I thought then that I was doing my duty, for it was an unjust law, and they did away with it pretty soon after that; but looking back *now*, and seeing how things turned out, I sometimes wish I'd let John Proctor stay here, and take what came of it."

"Why, didn't he pay that money, after all?" asked Esther, as her grandfather paused.

"Pay it!" he repeated. "Not a cent of it; and what's more we never saw hide or hair of him in this country again. For a while he wrote to his wife, and now 'n' then sent her some money, but it got longer between times, and by'm by the letters stopped for good, though we heard of him now 'n' then, and knew he was alive and earning a good living. I never could figure it out why he acted that way, for Nancy was a good wife, and up to the time he went away John seemed to think as much of his family as other men. There was such a thing in Bible times as folks being possessed with the devil," he added solemnly, "and I have my suspicions that that was what ailed John Proctor."

He paused when he had made this not wholly un-

kind suggestion, then went on: "It was terrible hard for all of us, but somehow it seemed as if it worked on Katharine more 'n anybody else. She hated the very name of John Proctor, but she took up the cudgels for his wife 'n' children, and I always thought 'twas slaving for them, and seeing all they went through with, that set her so against the men. Mebbe she might have got over it some, when the children grew older, and times eased up a little, but then came that trouble to Ruth, the oldest of Nancy's girls, and the one Katharine thought the most of.

"We thought Ruth had made a good match, though the man was consider'ble older 'n she was, — her mother hurried it on a little herself, for of course she was anxious to get the girls into homes of their own, — but he never was good to her after they were married. He broke her down with hard work, and holding her in, and the poor little thing only lived a year or two. After that if anybody said marriage to Katharine it was like tinder in dry leaves. She took to studying about woman's rights and all that, till she got to be as — well, as you saw her this afternoon."

"Poor Aunt Katharine!" said Esther, softly. That she had suffered wrong might surely bespeak in a generous mind some excuse for her bitterness, but that, after all, it was not her own wrongs, but those of

others which had burned that bitterness into her soul, made it seem even noble to the girl who had heard her story.

"Yes, it was too bad. I've always been sorry for Katharine," said the old gentleman, and then he added, with an asperity he could not quite repress: "but the trouble is she got into the way of looking all the time at the worst side of things, and by'm by it 'peared to her as if that side reached all the way round. She talks about folks having sense enough to put two 'n' two together, but I notice she always picks out the partic'ler two she wants when *she* adds things up."

A light step crossed the threshold at that moment, and Stella Saxon's graceful figure appeared behind her grandfather's chair. "Haven't you had enough of Aunt Katharine for one day, Esther?" she demanded. "Leave grandfather to think up some new arguments for the next time he goes to see her, and come with me. I want you to see what a picture it is from the back of our old barn when the shadows creep over the hills."

She lighted the lamp that stood by the open Bible, then slipped her arm through her cousin's and drew her away. "Thank you for telling me all this," said Esther, lingering a moment by her

grandfather's chair. "I love to hear stories of what happened here so long ago."

"There are plenty of 'em, and they'll keep," he replied, smiling; and then he returned to the Proverbs again with unabated enjoyment.

"Do you know," said Esther, as the two walked away, "I believe I should really love Aunt Katharine if I knew her."

Stella gave one of her shrugs. "There's no accounting for tastes," she said. Then, as she glanced in at the barn door, which they were passing at that moment, she added with a laugh: "I declare, if Kate hasn't managed to make her way with my brother Tom! They're hobnobbing together like two old cronies."

The truth was Kate Northmore had made up her mind to get acquainted with her cousin. Whether it was the barn or the boy that had brought her out this evening is not certain. She had a liking for a good quality of each. This particular barn was of a larger sort than she was used to, and the boy — she half suspected that he was smaller. There was something wrong about a boy who would go whistling off across the fields when his chores were done without saying "boo" to a girl who was looking after and longing to go with him. However, he might be only timid.

She had no thought of winning a place in his regard by the thing she did when she stepped into the barn to-night, but by chance she had done it. She had seen Dobbin standing in his stall with his harness on, as he had been put there an hour before. There was a rush of work now, for the cows were in the barn, and Tom and the hired man were seated at the milking. She had taken in the situation; then, with a word to Dobbin and a good-natured slap on his flank, stepped in beside him and removed his unnecessary burden.

It was a foolish thing to do, for she had on her pretty lawn, sash and all, but the fact that she had not minded her clothes, together with the surprising fact that she could do the deed at all, had impressed Tom deeply.

"Well," he said, "you're the first girl I ever saw who could do that."

"That!" repeated Kate, "why, I've helped about horses ever since I was big enough to reach up. Father's a doctor, you know, and the horses have to be got out in a hurry sometimes. I can harness and unharness about as quick as any man he ever had on the place. I'm strong in my arms." She made a quick, free movement of her arms, from which the sleeves fell back, showing the firm round muscles, then added

lightly: "I like everything about horses, specially driving. Dobbin's too fat to be any good. What makes you feed him so much?"

"You'd better ask grandfather that question," said Tom. "He never comes into the barn without piling his manger full of hay. He thinks the rest of us abuse him."

They exchanged a good-natured laugh. Then Kate said: "I should think you would want more than one horse on this place. I don't see how you can stand it to work behind oxen; they're so slow."

Tom's countenance grew a trifle rigid. "We like them well enough," he said stiffly.

"Oh, but you wouldn't," protested Kate, "if you'd ever worked with horses. Out our way they do all the work with them, and you'll hardly see a farmer driving into town with a one-horse team."

Tom would have scorned to appear at all impressed. "I shouldn't care for such a lot of horses," he said. "I like cows. There's more profit in them."

"Well, when it comes to cows you can make a bigger showing than we can," said Kate, "but that's because you raise milk and we raise crops." And then she added in a tone of candor, "I reckon that makes the difference in the way the work is done. You don't have big fields to plough and reap, and you can afford

to spend time crawling round behind oxen when we can't."

Tom did not offer any reply to this interesting theory. "What makes you say 'reckon' so much?" he asked abruptly.

Kate's eyes widened. "It's as good as 'guess,' isn't it?" she retorted. "I'd as lief reckon as guess any time."

Tom poured his pail of milk into the big strainer and turned to go. "I've got another cow to milk before I'm through," he said.

"I can milk, too," said Kate, "though I don't care much about it. Aunt Milly taught me." And then she added, with a glance down the line of stalls: "But if I were going to do it I shouldn't want the cows cooped up this way. I should want them out in the barn lot."

"What, loose in the yard?" repeated Tom. He positively had to stop now. "And have them walking round all the time you're trying to milk them? Well, I should think that would be a pretty business!"

"Our cow doesn't walk round when we're milking her," said Kate. "Why, a cow naturally wants to be milked when the time comes, and it's a great deal pleasanter being outdoors. We don't care so very much about the milking-stool, either," she added, laughing. "I *could* do it on a pinch without any."

"What, squat on your feet, and the cow not even tied up!" ejaculated Tom. The accomplishments of his cousin Kate were certainly out of the ordinary. He looked at her with a growing curiosity, then added loftily: "In this part of the country women don't milk. We don't think it's their business."

"Well, I'm glad you don't," said Kate; "but 'tisn't such a queer thing for women to do as you seem to think. In most countries women generally do it."

"I never heard of a woman milking before," said Tom, doggedly.

Kate's eyes grew big again. "Why, in stories they always do it," she cried.

Tom looked impervious to any memory of the sort, and she added, with insistence: "You must have heard of the woman who counted her chickens before they were hatched. She had a pail of milk on her head at the very time, you know; and in the 'House that Jack Built' it was the 'maiden all forlorn who milked the cow with the crumpled horn.' The man hadn't a thing to do with it except bothering her."

Certainly Tom could not deny acquaintance with those classics. "I never took much stock in Mother Goose," he said, starting on with his pail again.

"But you've *heard* of them," Kate cried triumphantly. He did not look back this time, but he was

evidently meditating. As for Kate, she felt that the acquaintance had begun in an auspicious manner, and perched on the side of the cutting machine to wait for his return.

They were together preparing some cut-feed for Dobbin's evening meal when the girls looked in at the door, and the talk was evidently flowing with the greatest ease.

"This is just like a cutting machine we used to have at home, and I have special reason to remember it," Kate was saying as she turned the wheel, "for I nearly lost the end of my thumb in it when I was a little tot. Father was at home, as good luck would have it, and he fixed it up so quick that no great harm came of it." She held up a pink thumb for Tom's inspection, and added, "You wouldn't know it now by anything except the nail being a little thicker than common at one corner, and that's really been an advantage to me, for I can open a jack-knife without asking a boy to do it for me."

Tom gave a grunt of approval. "And sharpen the pencil too?" he asked. Then, suddenly: "Are there many boys out your way? There are more girls here."

"Oh, there are lots of boys," said Kate, and then she added: "but the nicest one of all has gone to college,

and we don't see much of him nowadays. Are you going to college?"

He stirred the cut-feed for a minute without speaking, then shook his head. "Stella wants me to go," he said, "and grandfather used to talk about it, too, but he's sort of given it up lately. I guess he thinks I'm not scholar enough; and I'm not," he added frankly. "I don't take to studying. I'd rather work with things that are outside of my own head."

Kate dropped the handle of the cutting machine. "Tom," she exclaimed, in a tone of heartfelt sympathy, "that's just the way I feel, too. I never did like school as Esther and Mort and some of the others do. I don't want to be a stupid, of course — you have to know things or you're no account; but for my part, I'd never get them out of books if I could get them any other way. I like people and affairs better."

There is nothing like downright honesty to prepare the way for friendship. They had made a frank disclosure of feeling on an important subject, and Kate and Tom were comrades from that moment; comrades, in spite of the fact that certain other points of view were by no means held in common, and that each contended strenuously for his own. They talked for a long time of cousinly affairs. With his mother's quiet way of looking at things, Tom had a considerable spice

of his grandfather's shrewdness, and Kate found his opinions on various matters interesting.

"Aunt Katharine must be a strange woman," she said, when they had touched on a variety of other subjects. "Do they always fight, she and grandfather, as they did to-day?"

"Always," said Tom, promptly. "It's nip and tuck every time they come together. You'd think sometimes they fairly hated each other. But if one of them gets sick you ought to see how the other frets. Grandfather gets into a regular stew sometimes over her living off there by herself; but it's a good thing she does. We couldn't stand it if she lived here."

"What supports her?" asked Kate, with her quick instinct for practical details.

"Supports her?" repeated Tom; "why, Aunt Katharine's rich. Didn't you know that? She had some property left to her years ago, — it was city land, I believe, — and it rose in value so it made a fortune. I heard grandfather say once that she must have as much as forty thousand dollars of her own." The sum seemed unlimited wealth to the country boy. "Nobody knows what she'll do with it," he added; "she'll want to fix it so the men can't get it. She says she'd leave it to one of her female relatives if she could find one who'd promise never to marry."

"She'd better propose that to Stella," said Kate; "she's so fond of her art."

Tom whistled. "She isn't so fond of it but she'd leave it quick enough if the right one asked her," he said astutely.

And then they rose and walked together toward the house. Aunt Elsie, in the kitchen door, was calling, with an anxious note in her voice: "Girls, girls, why don't you come in? You're staying out in the dew too long."

CHAPTER VII.

HUCKLEBERRYING.

IT seemed as if a summer of ordinary time was compressed into that first fortnight at the old homestead. Esther wondered sometimes whether the surrounding hills, over whose tops the morning broke earlier, and in whose soft green hollows the twilights seemed to linger longer than any she had known before, had not something to do with the lifting of the days into the lengthened space of life and happiness. The charm of the New England landscape, its restful yet enticing beauty, its reserves, its revelations, had captured her fancy and her heart completely. Her letters were full of the new delight. Mrs. Northmore smiled as she read them, and felt that in Esther she was living over again the joys of her own girlhood.

As for Kate, she was feeling the new environment as keenly as her sister, but there was a difference in the letters. They were not rhapsodical, and they were sprinkled with questions, such, for instance, as, "*Don't*

we speak as correctly in the West as they do in New England?" "*Isn't* it absurd to drop the *r* clear out of words, and *do* we over-do it?"

Between herself and Tom Saxon there was continual sharpshooting as to the relative merits of their respective sections, but it did not diminish in the least their relish for each other's company. She rode with him in the mornings to the milk factory, and occasionally took down the load of cans in his stead. She went with him for the cows, and was regularly depended on as the person to take the luncheon to the hayfield in the middle of the forenoon. Sometimes she stopped and ate a doughnut with the workmen under the trees, but she had not yet developed a fondness for the peculiar beverage compounded of water, molasses, and vinegar, vaguely called "drink," which seemed the approved liquid in this region for quenching the thirst of haymakers.

Indeed, the daily round furnished to each of the girls so much of enjoyment that they could easily have spared the more formal pleasures, but Aunt Elsie had definite ideas as to the courtesies due between families, and Stella's prestige in the community gained ready attention for her cousins. There were calls in plenty to be received and returned, and for picnics and teas there were early invitations.

Esterly was counted one of the most social of New England towns, and its summer population included city boarders who had a mind for pleasure. They fell in with whatever was planned for them, Kate and Esther, with ready enjoyment, yet for them both the distinctive engagements of the old home and the old farm remained easily the best. One of them, suggested by Aunt Elsie one day at table, brought a thrill of peculiar pleasure.

"I do wish," she said, with a glance at the young people which included them all, "that we could get some huckleberries. They say they're ripe on Gray's Hill, and I do need something to make pies of."

Stella gave a little sigh. It was the first invitation of the season to an occupation which she detested; but Esther exclaimed: "Go huckleberrying! Oh, I should like that so much! I've heard mother talk about huckleberrying, and I want to see what it's like."

"So do I," said Kate, eagerly. "Why can't we go this afternoon?"

Stella gave another sigh, this time a deeper one. "Oh, what accommodating creatures you are!" she said. "I ought to want to go with you, of course, but to tell the honest truth I don't hanker for it, and I'm positively opposed to climbing Gray's Hill

unless we know for certain that those berries are ripe."

"I saw some there yesterday, over on the south side," said Tom.

"Then maybe you'd better go too," said his mother, persuasively. "You could show the girls right where they are."

Tom may have regretted that he had aired his knowledge, but there was no escape for him now, especially as his grandfather added briskly, "Yes, Tom, you can go as well as not, for we shan't get in the hay that's down this afternoon, it's so cloudy."

And so it happened that an hour later the four, well supplied with tin pails, were off in search of huckleberries. Across the fields odorous of new-mown hay, by the foot-bridge over the meadow brook, across the old county road and over the low stone wall, they made their pleasant pilgrimage. Tom and Kate were ahead, she keeping steady pace with his easy swing, lowlander though she was, and not to the manner born of such climbing as this. Once, in a dimple of the hill, she made a dash forward, and, swinging her pail above her head, shouted: "I've found the first! Here they are!"

But Tom, who was up with her in a moment, gave

a whoop of disdain as he scanned the low cluster of bushes. "Those! why, those are blueberries. Don't you know the difference?"

Kate confessed with some humility that she did not, but the humility vanished when he added loftily: "And just as like as not you never will. There were some Westerners boarding over at Lester's one summer, and those folks couldn't tell one from t'other clear up to the end of the season."

"Well," said Kate, with a toss of her head, "maybe we can't tell huckleberries from blueberries, but we can always tell hickory nuts from walnuts, which is more than you folks here can do, and there's a sight more difference between them than there is between *these* little things."

She broke a blueberry bush, and looked at it with an attention which promised that she, at least, would know the species when she met it again, then started on with the remark, "Well, whichever of them I get, I mean to fill my bucket with something before I leave this hill."

"There you go again," grumbled Tom, who had been rather set back by the taunt about the nuts. "You always call a pail a bucket."

"Well, it *is* a bucket," cried Kate, beating a tattoo on the bottom of hers with spirit. "You couldn't

prove that I was wrong when you went to the dictionary about it, and anyway it isn't half as funny to call a pail a bucket as to call a frying-pan a 'spider' and a stool a 'cricket.'"

"I suppose you children are quarrelling about something as usual," observed Stella, who with Esther had just caught up with the advance guard. "I wonder how you can keep it up so steadily. I should think you'd sometimes get tired."

"I'll tell you one thing, sis," said Tom, with brotherly responsiveness, "you'll have to keep at the picking a little steadier than you generally do, or it won't make anybody tired to carry home the berries you'll get. This is the way she does," he added, turning to his cousins; "she goes fidgeting round, looking for the place where they're thickest, and when she finds it she settles down and draws a picture of a tree, or a rock, or something. I'll bet she's got her drawing things with her now."

Stella did not deny the charge. "What irrelevant remarks you do contrive to make, Tom!" she said. "Come, go ahead, if you mean to show us where those berries are."

They found them, and were all busily picking in a few minutes more. However Stella's interest in huckleberries might flag later on there was no criticism to

be made on her attention at first, and her fingers flew over the bushes at a rate which augured well for the filling of her pail. As for the Northmore girls, they were in ecstasies. Kate settled down to the business at once, though for a while she ate most of the berries she picked, while Esther paused between the handfuls to take long whiffs of the sweet fern which grew everywhere among the bushes, and to fill her eyes with the landscape which looked fairer than ever from the side of this green old hill.

Everything was interesting — the sights, the smells, the blossoms which were all around them; even the sprig of lobelia which Tom presented for his cousins' tasting, having first cunningly prepared the way with spearmint and pennyroyal — how Kate wished she could return the favor with a green persimmon! — and the slender yellow worm, industriously measuring the bushes, had its own claim to attention. Its name and manner of travel reminded Kate of one of Aunt Milly's songs with an admonishing refrain of, "Keep an inching along, Keep an inching along," and she trolled it out with a rollicking plantation accent that charmed her audience.

Perhaps it was the singing which drew a traveller who was climbing up the hill in their direction. In a pause of the verses Tom suddenly exclaimed: "Upon

my word, there's Solomon Ridgeway. He's got his pack on his back, too. Let's have some fun."

It was indeed the queer protégé of Aunt Katharine who appeared at that moment, bowing and smiling as he emerged from behind a rock. Evidently Tom did not share his grandfather's extreme dislike for the man's society, for he advanced to meet him in the most friendly manner.

"Well, Solomon," he exclaimed, "so you thought you'd come huckleberrying, too! Do you expect to fill that box of yours this afternoon?"

The face of the little old man, which was fairly twinkling with pleasure, expressed an eager dissent. "Oh, no, I — I didn't come huckleberryin'," he said, "and I couldn't think of puttin' 'em in this box. Why this box — " he lowered his voice with a delighted chuckle — "has got some of my jewels in it. You see, I'm goin' over to see little Mary Berger. They say she's got the mumps, and I kind o' thought 'twould brighten her up to see 'em. It don't hurt the children — bless their hearts — to see fine things; it does 'em good. And I always tell 'em," he added earnestly, "that there *air* things better 'n pearls and rubies. 'Tain't everybody that the Lord gives riches to, and if they're good they'll be happy without 'em."

"Why, that's quite a moral, Solomon," said Tom.

"You ought to have been a preacher." He sent a roguish glance at the girls, then, throwing an accent of solicitude into his voice, added: "But aren't you afraid you might get robbed going through those woods? There's quite a strip of them before you get to Berger's."

The owner of the jewels sent an apprehensive glance into the woods which skirted the brow of the hill and answered bravely: "Yes, I be, Thomas. I be a little afeared of it. I — I won't go so far as to say I ain't. But I don't b'lieve a body or' to stan' back on that account when there's somethin' they feel as if they or' to be doin', and I've always been took care of before — I've always been took care of."

The manliness of this ought to have shamed Tom out of his waggishness, but he was not done with it yet. "Solomon," he said, with the utmost gravity, — "I should think you'd want to get your property into something besides jewellery. Then you wouldn't run such risks. Besides, if you had it in the bank, you know, it would be growing bigger all the time."

The little man's face wore a look of distress, and he put his hand on his box protectingly. "They tell me that sometimes," he said in a plaintive tone, "but I — I couldn't think of it. It wouldn't be half as much comfort to me as 'tis this way. Besides, I'm rich

enough now, and when a body's got enough, it's enough, ain't it? And why can't you settle down and take the good of it?"

"I think you're quite right, Mr. Ridgeway," said Stella. "It's perfectly vulgar for people to go straining and scrambling after more money when they have as much as they can enjoy already. The world would be a good deal pleasanter place than it is if more people felt as you do about that."

She punctuated this with reproving glances at Tom, to which, however, he paid not the smallest attention.

"But you know, Solomon," he said artfully, "if you only had your money where you could draw on it, you wouldn't have to work as you do now. They keep you trotting pretty lively at the farm, don't they? And I'll warrant Aunt Katharine finds you chores enough when you're at her house."

The little man's face was clear again. Here, at least, was a point on which he had no misgiving. "Law, Thomas," he said, "I — I like to keep busy. Why, there ain't a bit o' sense in a body bein' all puffed up and thinkin' he's too good to work like other folks jest 'cause he's rich. 'Tain't your own doings, being rich, leastways not all of it. It's partly the way things happen, and then it's the disposition you've got. That's the way I look at it.

And it always 'peared to me," he added, with the most touching simplicity, "that, when a body's rich as I be, he or' to do a leetle more 'n common folks to sort o' try 'n' pay up for it."

"Mr. Ridgeway," exclaimed Stella — it was impossible after this to let that graceless brother say another word — "would you mind showing us some of your pretty things right now? My cousins never saw them, and I'm sure they'd enjoy it ever so much."

The countenance of Solomon Ridgeway was aflame with pleasure. He lowered his box from his shoulders and unstrapped it with a childish eagerness. "Why, I — I'd be proud to, Miss Stella," he said, with a hurrying rapture. Then, looking about for a suitable place of exhibition, he added, "Jest come under that big chestnut tree over there, and I'll spread 'em all out so you can see 'em."

It was not huckleberrying, but something much more unique, which engaged them for the next half hour. The collection which Solomon Ridgeway drew from his box and spread before their dazzled eyes was a marvel of tinsel and glitter. There were brooches and rings and chains enough to have made the fortune of half a dozen pedlers; trumpery stuff, most of it, but what of that?

The owner was not one to let a carping world

settle for him the value of his treasure. There was paste that gleamed like diamonds in settings burnished like the finest gold, and there were the colors of topaz and emerald and sapphire and ruby. Who cared whether they flashed in bits of glass or in stones drawn from the mines? They were things of beauty for a' that, and they filled their owner's soul with joy. He had gathered them slowly through the savings of earlier years, and the gifts of friends; he loved them every one, and believed them to be of fabulous value.

"They ain't all I've got, you know. There's a lot more," he said repeatedly; and then he rubbed his hands together and smiled upon his audience with the air of a Crœsus demanding, "Do you know any one richer than I?"

It was impossible not to wish to give him pleasure, and more than once the girls exclaimed over the beauty of some trinket. Esther was especially warm in her admiration, and there was no insincerity in her words when she said: "I think you have some perfectly lovely things, Mr. Ridgeway. I don't wonder you prize them, and I'm sure that little girl who is sick will thank you all her life for letting her see them."

He had almost forgotten his friend on the other

side of the hill. He gathered up his treasures now with a sudden remembrance, lifted his box to his shoulders again and was off, turning back again and again to make his little bow, half of pomposity and half of humility, as he hurried away.

"Is he crazy, or isn't he?" exclaimed Kate, when he was fairly out of hearing.

"He's queer. That's all you can say," said Stella; "but for my part, I don't mind him. People are so much of a pattern here in America that I think it's rather nice to have one of a different sort mixed in now and then."

"I don't see how he can keep up his notion of being rich and live in a poorhouse," said Kate.

"Don Quixote thought all the inns were castles," said Stella. "I don't know why a person with an imagination like his shouldn't take a poorhouse for a first-class hotel."

Her interest in huckleberrying was gone now, and the mood Tom had foretold was upon her. Esther divined it as she saw her looking at the chestnut tree, with her head tipped to one side.

"Oh, do sketch it, dear," she whispered. "Did you really bring drawing materials with you?"

Stella laughed, and drew a pencil and small pad from the bag that hung at her belt.

"Fill my pail for me, and you shall have it for a souvenir," she said.

The sketch was a pretty thing, and the pails, though not all full, contained a goodly quantity of berries, when they descended the hill in the late afternoon. As they reached the bottom a sudden thought came to Esther. "Do you suppose your mother would care if I should take my berries round to Aunt Katharine?" she asked.

"My mother would be ready to give you a special reward for thinking of it," said Stella. "But do you really feel like going round by Aunt Katharine's? It's ever so far out of our way!"

"Oh, I don't care for that," said Esther, and she added quickly: "but please don't feel that you must go too. I know the way."

Perhaps she was not really anxious that Stella should accompany her, nor sorry that Kate was already far ahead with Tom, when she turned down the old road a few minutes later with her face toward Aunt Katharine's. "I shall only stay a little while," she called back. "You won't be home very long before me."

But she was wrong as to this. Supper was over and the sunset fading when she appeared at her grandfather's.

"She insisted on my staying, though I had no thought of her asking me," she explained to Aunt Elsie. "She was delighted with the huckleberries."

Sitting in the south doorway afterward with Stella, she said very earnestly: "You never saw anybody pleasanter than Aunt Katharine was all the time I was there. I'm sure she's a great deal kinder than you think she is. Do you know we got talking of Solomon Ridgeway, and she told me some real interesting things about him. She says he was married when he was young, but his wife only lived a few months. Evidently Aunt Katharine didn't think much of her, for she said she was a silly little thing, who cared more about finery than anything else. But he was all bound up in her, and when she died it almost killed him. He had a terrible sickness, and when he got over it his mind had this queer kink in it, and never came right afterward." She paused a moment, then added, "Somehow I couldn't help thinking that there might be a clew in that story to the reason why she is so good to him."

"She's just as queer in her way as he is in his. I guess it's an affinity of queerness," said Stella, carelessly. And then she called her cousin's attention to the color of the clouds, which were fading in airy fringes over Gray's Hill.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PAIR OF CALLS.

AMONG the honors which came to Ruel Saxon with advancing years there was probably none which he valued more than his position, well recognized in the community, as keeper of the best fund of stories of the olden time, and referee-in-chief on all debated points of local history. There were plenty of old people in Esterly, some even who had reached the patriarchal age in which he himself so gloried, but there was no other with a memory like his, none with so unique a gift for setting out the past event in warmth and color. The gift was his own, but the memory was in part at least that of some who had gone before.

It had been the old man's fortune in his youth to be the constant companion of a grandfather who, like himself, was a local authority; a deaf man, who relied much on the boy's clear voice and quick attention for intercourse with his fellows. Perhaps the service had been irksome sometimes to the boy, but

it had its reward for him now; for his grandfather's experiences and his own blended in his thought as one continuous whole, and covered a space of time no other memory in the town could match.

The time was not yet when every rural village of New England had its historical society, but the recovery of the past was becoming a fad in the cities, and families who valued themselves on their standing were waking up to the importance of making sure of their ancestors. A letter from some gatherer of ancient facts, making requisition on Ruel Saxon's knowledge, was not uncommon now, and more than once a caller had stopped at the farmhouse hoping to gain help from him in tracing some obscure branch of a family tree.

The person bent on such an errand was so commonly of serious and elderly aspect that the extremely stylish young man who rode into the yard one afternoon was not suspected by the girls, who saw him from the parlor, of belonging to this class. Kate, who was nearest the window, was quite excited by the appearance of a gentleman on horseback. She had not seen one before since she left home, and the horse itself was as interesting as the rider.

"I'll wager anything that's a blooded Kentucky,"

she said, craning her neck for a fuller view. "My, but isn't she a beauty? I'll have a good look at her if his highness gets down. Wouldn't I like to call out, 'Light, and come in, stranger!'" she added under her breath. "Stella, who is he? He must be some admirer of yours."

"Never saw him before," said Stella, who was eying him with as much curiosity as Kate. "I'll tell you what, he must be a connoisseur in art and has heard of my Breton Peasant. Ha! With that horse and that riding costume I shall charge him a hundred and fifty."

By this time the young man had reached the hitching post and jumped down from the saddle. He patted his horse's neck when he had adjusted the hitching rein, flicked the dust from his riding boots with his gold-handled whip, and proceeded toward the door.

"You go, Kate," whispered Stella, who was drawing Greenaway figures with pen and ink on a set of table doilies, and Kate was not loath.

"Is Deacon Saxon at home?" inquired the young man in a pleasant voice.

"I think so. Will you come in?" responded Kate.

"It isn't the Breton Peasant after all," murmured Stella to Esther. "I wonder if it can be an an-

cestor." She arranged the doilies with a quick artistic touch, and rose as the young man entered the room.

He had presented Kate with a small engraved card, and though it was a new discovery for her that gentlemen ever carried such things, she used it as if to the manner born.

"Mr. Philip Hadley, Miss Saxon and Miss Northmore," she announced easily, and Stella added, with a pretty bow, "And, Mr. Hadley, Miss Kate Northmore."

The young man looked bewildered. In search of a country deacon of advanced years, at an old-fashioned farmhouse, to be ushered into one of the most attractive of parlors, with three charming young ladies in possession, was enough to bewilder. But he rose to the surprise gracefully in another moment.

"I must apologize for intruding myself in this way," he said, "but I have heard that Deacon Saxon is quite an authority on Esterly antiquities, and I wanted to see him on a little matter of inquiry."

"He will be delighted to talk with you. You may be sure of it," said Stella.

It was only a minute before the old gentleman appeared, walking in his nimblest manner from his own room, whither Kate had gone in search of him. She

had put him in possession of his caller's name, and he extended his hand with an air of welcome and curiosity combined.

"Hadley? Did you say your name was Hadley? Well, I'm pleased to see you."

"I'm very pleased to see you, sir," said the young man, bowing with a deference of manner which was peculiarly pleasing. "I'm taking a liberty in calling on you, I'm well aware of it, but it's the penalty one pays for having a reputation like yours. People say you know everything that ever happened in Esterly, and as I'm looking up our family history a little, I thought perhaps you could help me. I confess though," he added with a smile, "I expected to see a much older person."

"Older than eighty-eight?" quoth Ruel Saxon. "I was born in the year seventeen hundred and ninety-one, and if I live till the twenty-first day of next June I shall be eighty-nine."

He was too much pleased with the young man's errand, and himself as the person appealed to, to pause for a compliment at this point, and added briskly, "I shall be glad to tell you anything I know. 'Tisn't many young men that go to the old men to inquire about things that are past. They did in Bible times. In fact, they were commanded to: 'Ask thy

father and he will show thee, thy elders and they will tell thee.' That's what it says; but they don't do it much nowadays."

"They have more books to go to now, you know, grandfather," said Stella, glancing from the figure she was drawing, a charming little maid in a sunbonnet, and incidentally holding it up as she spoke.

"Yes, too many of 'em," said her grandfather, rather grimly. "They'd go to the old folks more if they couldn't get the printed stuff so easy."

"But, grandfather," exclaimed Esther, "the young people can't all go to the old people who know the stories. Kate and I didn't have you, for instance, till a few weeks ago."

Her grandfather's face relaxed, and Mr. Philip Hadley looked amused.

"But Deacon Saxon is right," he said, turning to the young ladies. "It's a much more delightful thing to hear a story from one who has been a part of it, or remembers those who were, than to get it from the printed page. I fancy the spirit of a thing is much better preserved by oral tradition than by cold print. You remember Sir Walter attributed a good deal of his enthusiasm for Scottish history to the tales of his grandmother. I see you have a charming sketch of Abbotsford," he added, glancing at a picture on the

wall opposite, and from there with a questioning look to Stella.

She gave a pleased nod. "We were sketching in Scotland, a party of us, last summer," she said.

"Were you?" exclaimed the young man. "I was tramping on the Border myself."

Perhaps he would have liked to defer his consultation with the old gentleman long enough for a chat with the young lady, but the former was impatient for it now. He had been scrutinizing his caller's face for the last few moments with sharp attention.

"You say your name is Hadley. Are you any relation to the Hadleys that used to live in our town? There was quite a family of 'em here fifty years ago."

"I think I am," said the young man, smiling. "My father was born in Esterly, but moved away before his remembrance. Perhaps you knew my grandfather, Moses Hadley."

"I knew *of* him," said the old gentleman, nodding; "but our family never had much to do with the Hadleys, for they lived on the other side of town. They were good respectable folks," he added in a ruminating tone; "didn't care any great about schooling, I guess, but they were master hands for making money. I've heard one of 'em made a great fortune somewhere out West. He sent a handsome subscription to our soldiers' monument."

The young man, who had flushed distinctly during part of this speech, looked relieved at its conclusion. "That must have been my Uncle Nathan," he said. "My father went into business in Boston." Perhaps it was by way of foot-note to the remark about his ancestors' lack of zeal for learning that he added carelessly: "I remember my cousin came to Esterly once to see your monument. We were in Harvard together at the time."

The remark was lost on the old gentleman. He was pursuing his own train of recollection now. "I knew your grandmother's folks better 'n I did your grandfather's," he said. "Moses Hadley married Mercy Bridgewood, and the Bridgewoods and our folks neighbored a good deal."

"Did they?" exclaimed the young man, with a quick eagerness in his voice. "It was the Bridgewood line that I came to see you about. Did you ever hear of Jabez Bridgewood?"

"Jabez Bridgewood!" exclaimed Ruel Saxon. "What, old Jabe that used to live on Cony Hill? Why, sartin, sartin! He 'n' my grandfather were great cronies. I've heard my mother say more 'n once, when she saw him coming across the fields: 'Girls, we may as well plan for an extra one to supper. There's Jabe Bridgewood, and he 'n' your

grandfather'll set an' talk till all's blue. There'll be no getting rid of him.'"

The young man colored again, and this time the girls did too. But they might have spared their blushes. The old gentleman was serenely unconscious of having said anything to call them out, and was pursuing his subject now under a full head of delighted reminiscence.

"He was an uncommon bright man, old Jabez Bridgewood; sort o' crotchety and queer, but chuck full of ideas, and ready to stand up for 'em agin anybody. He was pretty quick-tempered, too, when anybody riled him up. My grandfather's told me more 'n once about a row he got into with Peleg Wright; and the beginning of it was right here in this room. You see, Peleg was a regular Tory, though he didn't let out fair 'n' square where he stood; and Jabez he was hot on the other side, right from the start."

A gleam of amused recollection came into his eyes as he added: "They used to tell about a contrivance he had on the hill to pepper the British with, if they should happen to come marching along his road. It was a young sapling that he bent down and loaded with stones and hitched a rope to, so he could jerk it up and let fly at a moment's notice. They called

it 'Bridgewood's Battery,' but I guess he never used it. He was firing that old flint-lock gun of his instead. He was one of the minute-men, you know.

"But about that fuss with Peleg Wright. I don' know just what 'twas Peleg said. He was sitting here talking with Jabe 'n' my grandfather, getting hold of everything he could, I guess; and he said something about our duty to the king that stirred Jabe up so that he just bent down and scooped up a handful o' sand — you know they had the floors sanded in those days, instead of having carpets on 'em — and flung it right square into Peleg's face."

"Shocking!" exclaimed Mr. Hadley, laughing. "Is that the sort of manners my great-great-grandfather had? I'm ashamed of him."

"Well, there was a good many that thought he hadn't or' to have done it," admitted the old gentleman, "but I don't know. Peleg was a terrible mean-spirited, deceiving sort of cretur. It came out afterwards that 'twas he that put the British on the track of some gunpowder our folks had stored up; and sometimes I've kind o' thought it served him right. The Bible says, 'Bread of deceit is sweet to a man, but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel,' and I don' know but your grandfather was just fulfilling scripture when he gave it to him."

"Do you suppose he thought of that verse when he did it?" said Mr. Hadley, laughing more heartily than before.

"Mebbe he didn't," said the deacon; "but there's been plenty of scripture fulfilled without folks knowing it. Well, naturally it made Peleg pretty mad, 'specially when folks twitted him 'bout it; and a day or two afterward he pitched on Jabez down town, and I guess it's more 'n likely one of 'em would have got hurt if folks hadn't separated 'em. Jabez wrote some verses about it afterward, and I remember my grandfather telling me one of 'em was:—

"'Old Tory Wright with me did fight,
Designing me to kill;
But over me did not obtain
To gain his cursèd will.'"

"So he was a poet, too!" exclaimed Mr. Hadley.

"Bless you, yes," said Ruel Saxon. "When he warn't contriving something or other, he was always making up verses. I've seen 'em scribbled with chalk all over his house. It was a little house without any paint on it, and when it got so full it wouldn't hold any more he'd rub 'em out and put on some fresh ones. Paper warn't as plenty in those days as it is now, specially not with Jabez."

"Do you remember any more of his verses?" asked Mr. Hadley, who was evidently a good deal impressed with this ancestor of his, in spite of his lack of that economic turn of mind which had so distinguished the other side of his house.

"I don' know as I do," said the old gentleman, "though I guess I could think up some of 'em if I tried. Oh, Jabez Bridgewood was a good deal of a character. He could do anything he set his hand to, and I never did see anybody that knew as much about things outdoors as he did. He was like Solomon, and spoke of the trees, 'from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall'; and when it came to the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the air, and the creeping things, it seemed as if he knew 'em all, though some folks did think he spent too much time watching 'em, for the good of his family."

"Why, he must have been a real genius, a Thoreau sort of man," exclaimed Esther, who had been listening with rapt attention, as she always did when her grandfather told a story. "Grandpa, won't you show me some day where his little house stood, and the tree he loaded with stones to fire at the British?"

"And please let me go, too," said Mr. Hadley, glancing at the girl, and catching her quick respon-

sive smile at her grandfather; "I should like it immensely."

"Why, to be sure, I should like it myself," said Deacon Saxon, promptly; "though there ain't anything there now but dirt and rocks. And I'll take you round by the old burying-ground and show you his grave, and the grave of my great-grandfather, John Saxon, that was killed by the Indians, if you want me to."

They had it settled in another minute, with Stella in the plan too. Mr. Hadley was to call again in a few days, and they were all to take the trip together. And then the young man stayed a little longer, not talking of his ancestors now, but of things more modern; of Scotland with Stella; of her impressions of New England with Esther; and with the old gentleman of the summer home in a neighboring town, which the Hadleys had lately purchased. It seemed he had ridden over from there to-day. There was no chance to talk with Kate of anything. She had disappeared long ago.

"I'm afraid you'll think I've inherited the staying qualities of my great-great-grandfather," he said, rising at last. "Really, I don't wonder he found it hard to get away from here." And then he bowed himself out with renewed expressions of gratitude

for the information he had received, and of delight in that trip that was coming.

"A most estimable young man," said Ruel Saxon, when he had ridden away.

"I think he's the most agreeable young man I ever saw," said Esther, warmly, and Stella added, "Quite *au fait;* but I mean to find out the next time he comes whether he really knows anything about art."

From Mr. Philip Hadley to Miss Katharine Saxon was a far cry, but the latter had a genius for supplying contrasts, and she furnished one at that moment by appearing suddenly at the door. Aunt Elsie, who had been picking raspberries in the garden, was with her.

"Well, Katharine," exclaimed her brother, hastening to meet her, "'pears to me you're getting pretty smart to come walking all the way from your house this hot day."

"I always had the name of being smart, Ruel," said the old lady, seating herself, and proceeding with much vigor to use a feather fan made of a partridge tail, which hung at her belt; "but I shouldn't have taken the trouble to show it by walking up here to-day if I hadn't had an errand. Mary 'Liza wants to go home for a couple o' days — her sister's going

to get married — and I s'pose I or' to have somebody in the house with me. Not that I'm 'fraid of anything," she added, "but I s'pose there'd be a terrible to-do in the town if I should mind my own business and die in my bed some night without putting anybody to any trouble about it. So I thought, long 's you've got so many folks up here just now, I'd see if one of the girls was a mind to come down and stay with me."

She had been facing her brother as she talked, but she turned toward Esther with the last words.

The girl's face lighted with an instant pleasure. "Let *me* come, Aunt Katharine," she said. "I should like to, dearly."

There was a gleam of satisfaction in Aunt Katharine's eyes. "I'd be much obleeged to you to do it," she said promptly.

"But Aunt Katharine," exclaimed Aunt Elsie, "don't you think you'd better come here and stay with us? We should like to have you, and it's a long time since you slept in your old room."

"I don't care anything particular about old rooms," said Miss Saxon. "I'm beholden to you, Elsie; but I'd rather be in my own house, long 's I can have somebody with me."

"I s'pose you've got Solomon Ridgeway there yet,"

observed her brother, maliciously. "You don't seem to count much on him, but mebbe you're afraid of robbers, with all his jewellery in the house."

She took no notice of the sarcasm. "Solomon's been gone 'most a week," she said. "Took a notion he wanted to be back at the farm again."

"So he's gone back to the poor'us, has he?" said the old gentleman. "Well, it's the place for him, poor afflicted cretur!"

She threw up her head with the quick impatient motion. "Dreadful 'flicted, Ruel," she said. "He's a leetle the happiest man I know."

"Hm," grunted her brother; "happy because he hain't got sense enough to know his own situation. He thinks he's rich, when all he's got wouldn't buy him a week's victuals and a suit o' clothes."

Miss Saxon's eyes narrowed to the hawk-like expression which was common in her controversies with her brother. "Oh, he's crazy, of course," she said, with an inexpressible dryness in her voice; "thinks he's rich when he's poor! But you didn't call Squire Ethan crazy when he had so much money he didn't know what to do with it, and was so 'fraid he'd come to want that he dassn't give a cent of it away, or let his own folks have enough to live on."

"I ain't excusing Squire Ethan," said the deacon,

bridling. "He made a god of his money, and he'll be held responsible for it. But Solomon Ridgeway ain't half witted. He's been crack-brained for the last forty years, and you know it."

The coolness of her manner increased with his rising heat. "Oh, Solomon's daft, Ruel," she said in her politest manner. "We won't argy about *that*. A man *must* be daft that takes his wife's death so hard it eeny most kills him, and he stays single all the rest of his life. A man that had full sense would be courting some other woman inside a year."

The deacon's eyes kindled. "You talk like one of the foolish women, Katharine," he said sharply. "A man ain't compelled to stay single all the rest of his days because the Lord's seen fit to take away his wife. The Bible says it ain't good for man to be alone, and 'whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing.'"

She laughed her thin mocking laugh. "And the more he has of 'em the better, I s'pose! You don't happen to remember, do you, any place where it says she that finds a husband finds a good thing?"

Apparently the exact verse was not at hand, but Ruel Saxon was prepared without it. "There are some things that folks with common sense are s'posed to know without being told," he said tartly.

The words had come so fast from both sides that

even Aunt Elsie had not been able to interpose till this moment. She seized the pause now with hurrying eagerness. "Aunt Katharine," she said, "here you are sitting all this time with your bonnet on. You must take it off and stay to supper with us."

The old woman rose and untied the strings. "Thank ye kindly, Elsie," she said; "I b'lieve I will."

CHAPTER IX.

A GLIMPSE FROM THE INSIDE.

IN the cool of the day Aunt Katharine and Esther walked together across the fields to the little house on the county road. The sunset was throbbing itself out above the hills in a glory of crimson and gold, and the girl's face seemed to have caught the shining as she moved tranquilly toward it.

In the doorway of the barn Tom and Kate watched them go, and exchanged comments with their usual frankness. It was their favorite place for discussion — that and the wood-pile — and few were the subjects of current interest which did not receive a tossing back and forth at their hands when the day's work was done.

"That's an uncommon queer thing for Aunt Katharine to do," observed Tom. "When she's been left alone before she's always got one of the Riley girls to stay there and paid her for doing it. She must have taken a shine to Esther. Maybe she thinks she can work her round to some of her notions."

"TOM AND KATE WATCHED THEM GO."

Kate shook her head. "Esther isn't her sort of person at all," she said. "Aunt Katharine would take somebody that's strong-minded like herself if she wanted a follower in those things."

Tom flicked a kernel of corn at a swallow that swooped down from a beam above his head, and remarked carelessly, "Maybe strong-minded folks had rather have those that ain't so strong-minded to work on."

There was something in this that gave a passing uneasiness to the look in Kate's black eyes. She was silent a moment, then said with emphasis, "Well, I'll risk Esther Northmore;" and a minute later, oddly enough, she was talking of Morton Elwell, and wondering what he found to do now that wheat harvest and haying were over at home.

"If he's out of a job I wish he'd come round this way," observed Tom. "We need another hand in our meadow, and we'd set him to work right off."

"And supply him with a scythe to work with, I suppose," said Kate, scornfully. "I imagine Mort Elwell! He rides a mowing machine when *he* cuts grass."

"Well, he couldn't ride it in our meadow," retorted Tom. "There isn't a Hoosier on top of the ground that could do it. I don't care how smart he is."

(He had been tantalized at frequent intervals ever since Kate's coming by accounts of Morton Elwell's smartness.) "A scythe is the only thing that'll work in a place like that."

"Out our way they wouldn't have such a place," said Kate, loftily. "They'd put in tile and drain it, if they were going to use the ground at all."

"A nice job they'd have of it," grunted Tom; and then he remarked incidentally: "I heard Esther tell Stella the other day that our meadow was the prettiest place she ever saw. They were sitting by the brook, and she said it made her sick to think how your creek at home looked, all so brown and muddy."

This was a manifest digression, but Tom had a genius for that, and a quotation from Esther bearing on the attractions of New England was a missile he never failed to use, when it came to his hand in discussion with Kate. She looked annoyed for a minute. There was no denying that the creek at home was a sorry-looking stream beside that beautiful meadow brook, with its clear pebbly bottom. But she recovered herself in another moment.

"Oh, your brook is pretty, of course," she said graciously, "but it's all in the way you look at it. For my part I don't mind having a good rich brown in the color of ours. It shows that the land isn't

all rocks; that there's something in it soft enough to wash down."

Tom whistled. He was used to Kate now, and never really expected to have the last word. Returning to the subject of the hay-making, he remarked: "Grandfather was down there for a while this afternoon, to show us how fast we ought to work, I suppose — you ought to have seen him bring down the swath — but he couldn't keep it up very long, and made an errand to the house; a good thing he did, too, or he'd have missed that call that tickled him so. I say, that fellow must have been a regular swell for all you girls to be so taken with him."

"Who said *I* was taken with him?" demanded Kate. "It was his horse I fell in love with."

"Well, the others were, if you weren't," persisted Tom. "Esther seemed to think she never saw such a young man."

"She's seen some that are a good deal nicer," said Kate, with emphasis, and then she added rather irritably: "I shouldn't think a fellow could have much to do who spends his time running round to find out what his great-great-grandfather did. For my part I don't take much stock in that sort of thing."

And on this point they were in perfect agreement. Tom, like Kate, had no great use for ancestors.

Meanwhile the shadows lengthened, and the two slow figures moving across the fields reached the end of their walk. That the days to be spent with Aunt Katharine would seem rather long, Esther fully expected. Yet she had wanted them. She had been honest when she said to Stella at parting: "Don't pity me. I really like it!" and she wondered at the incredulous look with which her cousin had regarded her. With all there was of taste and artistic feeling in common between these two, there was something in Esther, something of seriousness and warmth, which the other partly lacked.

Possibly the girl expected — as Stella had warned her — that the old woman would at once mount the hobby, which she was supposed to keep always saddled and bridled, as soon as they were fairly in the house together, but as a matter of fact, Aunt Katharine did nothing of the kind. She talked, as they sat in the twilight, of Esther herself, of her work at school, and the things she enjoyed most in this summer visit, and then of Esther's mother, recalling incidents of her childhood, and speaking of her ways and traits with an appreciation that filled the girl with surprise and delight.

"Your mother might have done something out of the common," she said as she ended. "She was made

larger than most folks, and with all her soft ways, she had more courage. She might have had a great influence. I always said it."

"Mother has a good deal of influence now," said Esther, smiling. "Father says there isn't a lady in our town whose opinions count for as much as hers."

"Of course, of course," said the old woman, with a note of impatience creeping into her voice; "and the upshot of it is that she makes old ways that are wrong seem right, because she, with all *her* faculties, manages to make the best of 'em. She might have done better than that, *if she'd seen.*"

And then she rose suddenly and lighted a lamp. "I always have a chapter before I go to bed," she said. "You might read it to-night."

Esther was surprised. She had somehow gained the impression, in Aunt Katharine's talks with her brother, that she held the scriptures rather lightly, but apparently this was wrong. "What shall I read?" she asked, going to the stand on which lay the Bible, a large and very old one.

"Read me that chapter about Judith," she said, "how she delivered her people out of the hand of Holofernes, and all the city stood up and blessed her."

Esther sat for a moment with a puzzled face, her finger between the leaves of the book. "Is that in

Judges?" she asked, with a vague remembrance of a prophetess who led Israel to battle.

The old woman lifted her eyebrows. "Oh, that is in the Apocrypha," she said. "Well, if you don't know about Judith you mustn't begin at the end of her story. Read me about Deborah; that's a good place."

There was no sweeter sleep under the stars that night than came to Esther. She had thought with some foreboding of a feather bed, but it was the best of hair mattresses that Aunt Katharine provided. Even the high-post bedstead, with draperies of ancient pattern, which she had really hoped for, was wanting. There was nothing to prevent the air which came through the wide east window, full of woodsy odors and the droning of happy insects, from coming straight to her pillow.

There was indeed nothing in the room to recall the fashions of the past except the coverlet, wrought in mazy figures tufted of crocheting cotton, and a round silk pincushion mounted on a standard of glass, which standard suggested former service as part of a lamp. Aunt Katharine had as little care to preserve the customs of her foremothers as their ways of thinking. She had told the girl to rise when she felt like it; but in the early morning Esther found herself wide awake, and the sound of stirring below brought her quickly to her feet.

Aunt Katharine was busy about the stove when she entered the kitchen, and the sight of her niece in her clean work-apron evidently pleased her. They took a cup of tea with a fresh egg and a slice of toast at the kitchen table, and Esther tried to recall her dream of the night before for the entertainment of the other. "It must have been reading about Deborah that put it into my head," she said. "I thought I was living all by myself in a house that was under a great oak tree, and all sorts of people were coming to me on all sorts of errands, and finally I was going out with a great company of them to battle, but I don't know what the battle was about, or how it came out," she ended lightly. "I think the dream must have broken off when I heard you moving about down here."

"Dreams are queer things," said Aunt Katharine, who had been listening with attention.

"Of course I don't believe in them," Esther made haste to say, "but Aunt Milly always insisted that the first dream you had when you slept in a strange place meant something. I'm sure it meant something to sleep in such a lovely room, and rest as sweetly as I did," she added, with an affectionate smile at the old lady.

Miss Katharine Saxon had long prided herself on

a complete indifference to any blandishments of words or manner on the part of her fellow-creatures. It wasn't what people said, nor how they said it, but the principles they lived up to, that constituted a claim to her regard, as she often declared; but she fell a victim as easily as scores had done before her to the pretty tactful ways of Esther Northmore and her gift for saying pleasant things. Not in years had she been as warm, as open, and confiding as during that visit. In the entertainment of her niece she made no mistake. She let her help in the housework and watched with pleasure while she darned a tablecloth. She was studying the girl, with genuine liking to guide the study.

And Esther, for her part, was watching her Aunt Katharine with growing regard and sympathy. It was a surprise at first to note the solicitude with which she inquired after the sick child of Patrick Riley, the Irishman who carried on her farm, and came night and morning to attend to her chores; and the girl was not prepared for the almost maternal interest with which the old woman looked after the dumb creatures on her place.

On the subject which she was known to have most at heart — the wrongs of her sex — she said nothing for a while, and Esther was too mindful of those old

griefs in her life to provoke the theme. It came casually, the second day, as they sat seeding raisins in the kitchen. A boy had brought a pail of berries to the door, but she refused them. An hour later a girl came with a similar errand, and without hesitating she made the purchase.

"I hope you didn't change your mind on my account," said Esther, when the child was gone, remembering apologetically something she had said in the interval about her own liking for huckleberries. "With all the fruit you have I'm sure we didn't need them."

Miss Saxon smiled. "I didn't change my mind," she said. "I thought some girl would be along, and so I waited."

The boy's face had looked eager, and Esther felt rather sorry for him. "Don't you suppose he needed the money as much as she did?" she asked rather timidly.

"Mebbe he needed it more," said Aunt Katharine. "The Billingses are worse off than the Esteys, but that ain't the p'int. It's a good thing for a girl to be earning money. It's worth something to her to make a few cents, and know it's her own. That's what the girls need more 'n anything else, and I always help 'em every chance I get."

Esther pondered for a minute without speaking. The old woman's eyes had taken on a look of deep seriousness. "That's the root of all the trouble," she said almost fiercely, "this notion that the women must be forever dependent on the men, and take what's given 'em and be thankful, without trying to do for themselves. I tell you it was never meant that one half of the world should hang on the other half, and look to 'em for the shelter over their heads, and the food they eat, and the clothes they wear. It degrades 'em both."

Esther stopped seeding raisins and looked at her aunt in astonishment. An arraignment of the existing order of things such as she had not heard before was suggested here. Perhaps the very blankness of her expression appealed more than any protest to the old woman. The defiance went out of her voice, and it was almost a pleading tone in which she went on: —

"Don't you see what comes of it? Don't you see? It makes the girls think they must get married so 's to have a home and somebody to support 'em, and then they plan 'n' contrive — they 'n' their mothers with 'em — how to catch a husband." She shut her lips hard, as if her loathing of the thing were too great for utterance, then went on: "But small blame

to 'em, I say, if that's the only thing a woman's fit for; small blame to 'em if they won't let her choose her work for herself and live by it, without calling shame on her for doing it. It's a little better now — thank God and the women that have been brave enough to go ahead in the face of it! — but I've seen the day when an old maid was looked on as something almost out of nature. 'Let a girl dance in the pig's trough,' if her younger sister gets married before her. Let her own she's disgraced, and be done with it. That's the old saying, and the spirit of it ain't all dead yet. It never will be till women are as free as men to do whatever thing is *in 'em* to do, and make the most of it."

Her face had grown white as she talked, and the color had paled a little even in Esther's. "Oh," she said, "I've thought of that, too. I've hated it when people talked as if there was nothing for girls but to get married." The color came back with a quick flush as she added: "I'd rather die than be scheming about that myself; but what can you do? Boys always talk about the work they mean to follow. People would think there was something wrong with them, if they didn't; but if girls say anything — I did try once to talk about what I could do to earn my own living, but father acted as if I was somehow

reflecting on him, and mother — though I'm sure she understood me better — seemed worried and troubled."

"That's it, that's it!" said Aunt Katharine, bitterly. "Even those that say a woman's got a right to choose, say under their breath that she'll never be happy if it's anything but getting married. I tell you it's finding your own work and doing it that makes people happy, and that's a law for women as much as men."

"But if you knew your work!" said Esther, piteously. "It seems to me there are very few girls who have anything special they can do."

"That's no more true of girls than 'tis of boys," said Aunt Katharine. "We should find something for one as well as for the other, *something* they could work at, if we settled it once for all that they had the same right and need. But we've got to start with that idea right from the beginning."

After that, during the time which remained of the visit, the talk came often into the circle of this thought. Sometimes Miss Saxon talked of the wrongs of women, of their inequality before the law, and of the tyranny of men, with a bitterness before which the girl shrank, but the very vehemence of the other's belief carried her with it, and through it all one thing grew more and more clear to her. It was not hatred of men, but love of her own sex, which lay

at the bottom of Katharine Saxon's defiance of the social order. The longing to help women, to lift them into what seemed to her a larger, freer living, had laid hold of her wholly, and held her in the white heat of its consuming passion.

Once, when she had been speaking of the struggle which lay before any woman confronted with the problem of supporting a family, Esther said softly: "Grandpa told me about you one night, Aunt Katharine; how you gave up everything and worked so hard to help your sister when she came home with her children. I thought that was grand."

The old woman did not speak for a moment, then she said, with a singular lack of emotion in her voice: "Poor Nancy! Yes, I thought then 'twas my duty to do what I did, and mebbe 'twas; but sometimes I've thought — Nancy and her girls were only a han'-ful out of the many — sometimes I've thought mebbe I might have done more good if I'd been fighting for 'em all. I gave the best fifteen years of my life to that old spinning-wheel, and scarcely looked out of my corner." And then the lines of her face stiffened as she added: "But I had my reward. I was saved from marrying — marrying Levi Dodge."

The scorn in her voice as she said the last words was indescribable. For a while neither of them

spoke. Then Esther said, leaning toward the other, her heart in her eyes, and her breath coming quick, "Aunt Katharine, wouldn't you have women marry at all?"

She threw up her head with the quick, impatient movement which Esther had come to know so well. "They might all marry and welcome," she said, — "it's the Lord's way to preserve the race, — if only we could get rid of the notions that folks have joined onto it to spoil it."

And then the note that was not of defiance, but pleading, came back to her voice, as she added: "But I'd have some of the women that *see* stay free from it till we've worked this thing out, and made a fair chance for those that come after us; I'd have 'em show that the world has some interests for women outside of their own homes, and some work they can do besides waiting on their husbands and children; I'd have 'em show that a woman ain't afraid nor ashamed to walk without leaning; and I'd have 'em keep their eyes open to see what's going on. I'd have 'em hold themselves clear of the danger of being blinded even by love to the things that need doing."

No doubt there was much that was wholly vague to Esther Northmore in the vision of service which

lay before the mind of Katharine Saxon. But the thought of some renunciation for the sake of others — some work, unselfish and lasting — what generous young soul has not at moments felt the thrill of it? Their eyes met in a glow of sympathy, if not of full understanding, and the clock ticked solemnly in a stillness which, for a minute, neither of them could break.

It was a light step at the open door which suddenly drew their attention. Kate was coming briskly up the walk with a letter in her hand.

"It's from home," she said, as Esther rose to meet her, "and I thought you ought to have it."

She noticed the look of exaltation on her sister's face, and something she had never seen before in Aunt Katharine's. Her efforts at conversation met with little response. She was conscious of some atmosphere surrounding these two which she herself could not penetrate, and she was glad to slip away at the end of a very short call.

"They must have been talking about something awfully serious," she said to Tom afterward. "They looked as solemn as a pair of owls. I hope that girl of Aunt Katharine's will come home when she said she would. For my part, I think Esther's stayed there long enough."

CHAPTER X.

SOME BITS OF POETRY.

AUNT KATHARINE'S maid of all work did not outstay her leave of absence, and at evening of the third day Esther came home to her grandfather's. She insisted that she had had a good time, and strongly resented being regarded as a martyr who had sacrificed herself to a painful cause.

"Why, Aunt Katharine made it delightful for me," she said, "and I liked her better and better all the time I stayed."

"I hope she didn't win you over to all her notions, especially that prejudice against getting married," said Stella, with a laugh.

"She certainly didn't argue me out of the belief that life might be worth living if one happened to stay single," returned Esther, and though she said it lightly, the look in her eyes was sober.

But they did not talk long of Aunt Katharine. There was something of livelier interest to be discussed now. It had been the plan from the first that

sometime during the summer they should visit Boston with Stella. The summer was wearing away, and it was time for the plan to mature. Moreover, a letter had come from a cousin, who had a cottage for the season at Nahant, inviting them all to spend a week with her there.

Kate was in raptures, and Stella was mapping out a fortnight's touring which should include a circuit of pleasures, Boston and the seashore, with Concord and Cambridge, and perhaps Old Plymouth, thrown in. It was all delightful to think of. For the next few days their minds were full of it, and in the midst came that pleasant trip which had been planned with Mr. Philip Hadley.

He was punctual to his engagement, and appeared early on the appointed afternoon. But he was not on horseback now. He was in a stylish top buggy, behind a pair of high-stepping bays. Ruel Saxon had planned to take the two girls with him in the family carriage — Kate had other plans for the afternoon — but Mr. Hadley's buggy changed all that.

"If one of the young ladies will ride with me I shall be delighted," he said, glancing with a smile at Esther, who happened to be the only one of them in the room at the moment.

She returned the smile, then turning to her grand-

father, settled the arrangement in just the right way. "Grandfather," she said, "we must let Stella go with Mr. Hadley. That will be nice for them both, and then you and I will go together. I don't want to be selfish, but I shan't be here much longer, you know, and must make the most of my chances for riding with you."

The old gentleman looked gratified, and Mr. Hadley smiled again. As for Stella, there was no doubt of her satisfaction with the arrangement when she came in a minute later. She was looking exceedingly stylish in a pale green dress, with hat and parasol to match, and quite the figure to sit with Mr. Hadley behind those handsome bays.

It was a perfect afternoon, and a light rain the night before had laid the dust in the country roads. It was the least frequented of them all, a track which was hardly more than a cart-path which led by the old Bridgewood place, and they tied their horses to a rail fence and climbed on foot to the top of the sharp knoll on which the house once had stood. There was no trace of it now. The walls on which their eccentric owner had once hung his verses in the wind had long ago dropped away, and the very stones of its foundation had been removed out of their place.

Even the tree which had been part of his "battery"

— if indeed it survived the experience — could not be distinguished now in the thick grove of maple and chestnut and birch which covered the place. Only the view from the hilltop remained unchanged, and this, as Stella declared, sitting breathless at the end of the climb, justified the owner's choice of a dwelling-spot, and must have inspired his muse.

From there to the old burying-ground was by a winding way, for Ruel Saxon was in historic mood, and guided his party past the lake haunted by the memory of conjuring Jane, who had been drowned there as a witch long, long ago; past the meadow where a little party of the early settlers, busy with making hay one summer afternoon, had fallen victims to the tomahawks of the Indians; and past the rock where Whitefield, shut out from the churches, had preached one Sabbath day to a crowd of spell-bound and weeping people.

Sometimes he drew Dobbin to the side of the road, and giving the buggy space beside him, paused while he set out the event which the scene called up with vivid description and trenchant comment. He was no mean chaperon in guiding others over the track of the past, and this afternoon he was at his best.

The old burying-ground lay on the edge of a pine wood, on the outskirts of the village. It was more

than half a century since the sod had been disturbed, and grass and daisies possessed the paths which once lay plain between mounds which years had smoothed to almost the common level. There had been no encroachment of a growing town upon its borders to break its quiet with the noise and hurry of a strenuous life. It lay, an utter quietness, in the beauty of the summer afternoon, a spot in which it was impossible not to feel that a great peace must have infolded those whose bodies had mouldered to dust in its tranquil keeping.

Yet perhaps Esther was the only one of the little company who felt the pensive influence of the place, and she had never stood before in an old New England burying-ground. Even she did not keep it long, for Ruel Saxon was full of a bustling eagerness to find the graves they had come to seek, and the quaintness of the mortuary devices and inscriptions on the low gray stones soon claimed her whole attention.

"Your great-great-grandfather made up a good many of these epitaphs," observed the old gentleman to Mr. Hadley. "He was a wonderful hand for that. Folks were always going to him when their relations died — those that wanted anything except verses of scripture under the names. Here's his own grave now!" he exclaimed, pausing in his rapid searching,

and not a little pleased with himself that he had so quickly found a spot which he had not seen in many years: —

"'Sacred to the memory of
JABEZ BRIDGEWOOD.
Born Aug. 1, 1735 — died Nov. 12, 1810.'

"That's his stone, and no mistake."

Mr. Hadley was bending over it now. Below the inscription which the old man had read were four lines which the creeping moss had almost obliterated. He took a knife from his pocket and scraped a few words.

"Ah," he said, lifting his head, "there is evidently one he didn't write: —

"'Oh Friends, seek not his merits to disclose,
Nor draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)
The bosom of his Father and his God.'"

"No," said Ruel Saxon, who did not recognize the slightly changed familiar lines, "he didn't write that. But he picked it out, and left word in writing to have it put on his stone. I remember hearing my grandfather talk about it. Some folks thought 'twas queer he didn't write his own epitaph. It always tickled him so when he got a chance to do it for other folks."

"Poor man," said Mr. Hadley, with a smile, "it was probably his only chance of publication. Think what that must have meant to him! But I'm glad he recognized a superior poet. It's a mark of greatness."

They separated a little now, moving about among the headstones, and reading, as they could, the old inscriptions. Some of them were provocative of an amusement which must have its way even in this hallowed spot.

There was one which ran: —

> "Here lies, cut down like unripe fruit,
> Ye ſon of Mr. Jonas Boot,
> And Mrs. Jemima Boot his wife named Jonathan."

"I rather hope my ancestor didn't write that," said Mr. Hadley. Then, noting the date of the said Jonathan's death, 1748, he added, with a shake of his head, "But he might; it's possible, if his poetic genius blossomed early."

There was another close by which Stella was reading now. It was inscribed to a girl of sixteen: —

> "Too good for earth, God in His love,
> Took her to dwell with saints above."

"Poor little thing!" she said, under her breath. "I wonder if she liked living with the saints half as well

as with her own girl friends. It's to be hoped that she found some there."

There was dignity in one over which Esther was bending now: —

> "Let not ye dead forgotten lye,
> Leſt men forget that they muſt die;"

and a touch of real tenderness was in the one which stood beside it under the name of a little child: —

> "She faltered by the wayside,
> And the angels took her home."

But this, which came next, was not so felicitous: —

> "God took him to His Heavenly home,
> No more this weary world to roam."

This, to a babe of six months, certainly indicated a paucity of rhymes on the part of the composer, and Mr. Hadley pointed in triumph to a year marked on the little gray slab which plainly antedated his ancestor.

But the stone which by the consent of all was pronounced the most unique was inscribed to Keziah, a "beloved wife who put on immortality" at the age of thirty-five. Below the name and date was carved an emblem suggestive of a chrysalis, with the words, "Keziah as she was;" and under this appeared the

head of a cherub, with the wings of a butterfly sprouting from its swollen cheeks, and the words, "Keziah as she is."

Stella hovered around this for some time in convulsed admiration. "I'm so glad there were artists as well as poets in those days," she said; and then she added, with a levity she could not repress, "it reminds one for all the world of the advertisements, 'Before and after taking.'"

There was another erected to the memory of a wife which called forth almost as much admiration. The virtues of the deceased were set forth with unusual fulness, and the record of her long services to society, the church, and her family, ended with the words, "She lived with her husband sixty years, and died in the hope of a better life."

Even Deacon Saxon chuckled over this, and then added, "I don't b'lieve my sister Katharine ever heard of that, or she'd have thrown it up to me before this."

It was queer what oddities of thought and expression had got themselves cut in some of these stones, and there were commonplaces which occurred over and over: —

> "Friends nor physicians could not save
> This loving ——"

Was father, mother, husband, the needed title? Alas, all were easily supplied, and then followed the inevitable "from the grave."

There was one with a harsh creditor accent, before which light-hearted readers could hardly help shrinking a little: —

> "Death is a debt to Nature due,
> I've paid it now, and so must you."

But there was another, carved more than once, which might well cause a deeper shudder. It ran: —

> "Beneath this stone Death's prisoner lies,
> Ye stone shall move, ye prisoner rise,
> When Jesus, with Almighty word,
> Calls his dead Saints to meet their Lord."

"Dreadful theology, don't you think?" Mr. Hadley said, turning with a little shiver to the girls, and their grandfather added his assent to theirs with emphasis. "Yes, Jesus hasn't got any dead saints. They or' to have remembered what He said Himself, that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

But by far the greater number of these ancient headstones were marked with texts of scripture, and however mirth might be provoked by sentiment or phrase from other sources, the simple dignity of the book of books always brought back seriousness and

reminded on what word the hearts of men had leaned, through the long generations, to endure the old, old sorrow of death. The faith of the fathers, not their fashions, was the thought which one must bear away in the end from such a spot.

They had paused longest by the graves of Ruel Saxon's people, and again as they left the place he lingered for a moment by the low gray line of stones. "They were God-fearing men and women, all of them," he said, with tender reverence in his voice; then, lifting his face, he added, with inexpressible pride and solemnity: —

> "My boast is not that I deduce my birth
> From loins enthroned, and rulers of the earth,
> But higher far my proud pretensions rise —
> The son of parents passed into the skies."

That was the last word spoken before they let down the bars in the old stone wall and made their way back to their horses. Possibly the young man, who was so anxious to establish his family record, may have caught, at that moment, a new thought of ancestral honors.

It had been a full afternoon, and it was a late one when they reached the farmhouse. Mr. Hadley would have mounted to his buggy at once after helping Stella down, but the deacon interposed.

"Why, it's high time for supper," he said, "and you mustn't drive back to Hartridge without having a bite to eat, you or your horses either."

"Of course not," said Stella, cordially. "We count on your staying to supper." And then she added archly, "I really think you ought, for the sake of your great-great-grandfather."

"Whom your great-great-grandmother could never get rid of?" he replied, laughing. "I'm not sure but on his account I ought to go, to convince you that his descendants at least can turn their backs on pleasure."

But he did not insist on doing it, and it is extremely doubtful whether Jabez Bridgewood ever enjoyed a meal under the old roof more than Philip Hadley enjoyed the one that followed. The fact was, both Stella and her mother had foreseen that the delays and digressions of the old gentleman in showing his party around would consume the afternoon, and bring the young man back at about this time. They had conferred carefully as to the setting of the table in the best old-fashioned china, with a pretty mingling of Stella's hand-painted pieces; the menu had been settled to a nicety in advance, and the delicate French salad, which Mr. Hadley pronounced the best he had ever tasted, had been compounded by Stella herself before leaving the house.

Tom and Kate, who were just in from a tramp to a distant pasture, had their places with the others. Tom had objected at first to sitting down with "the nabob," as he called their guest, but Kate's persuasions and his own curiosity finally overcame him.

The meal was a social one. The girls talked of their intended outing, and Mr. Hadley, who was much interested, made some capital suggestions.

Then a question or two drew him out in regard to his own summer, and he talked quite charmingly of a yachting trip in July. There was a plan for the White Mountains early in September. He had succeeded better than usual in killing time this summer, he said; to which he added gracefully, that he believed no other day of it had been as pleasant as this which was just ending.

This brought them back to the excursion of the afternoon, and Esther in particular grew quite eloquent over the delights of it.

"That's what it is to live in an old country," she said wistfully. "You feel as if you belonged to the past as well as the present when you stand in the places where the things you've read of really happened. I think it's beautiful to have historic associations."

There was an approving murmur over this sentiment, but Kate did not join in it. There was no mistaking

its implied suggestion of a point in which New England had the advantage over her native state. She might possibly have let it pass if Tom had not had the indiscretion at that moment to press her foot under the table. Up to this point her part in the conversation had been mostly questions, but now she advanced an opinion boldly.

"Well, I must say I never wanted to live in an old country on that account," she said. "I remember when mother used to read Child's History of England to us, I was always glad that our country began later, and that we didn't have those cruel times, when people were beheaded for nothing, and princes' eyes put out by their wicked uncles, in our history at all. Those things you've been hearing about this afternoon — there wasn't anything very beautiful about some of them. That poor old thing they drowned — I don't suppose she was any more a witch than I am. And that rock where Whitefield preached — it was a mean bigoted thing to keep him out of the churches, and I should think good people would be ashamed every time they looked at the rock."

There was silence for a minute when she ended. Then Mr. Hadley said, with a smile, "In other words, if you have historic associations at all, you want those of the very best sort." To which he added, lifting his

eyebrows a trifle, "I presume you wouldn't object to Bunker Hill and Lexington!"

Kate took a swallow of water before speaking. Then she said with dignity: "I have never regarded Bunker Hill and Lexington as local affairs. I think they belong to the whole country!"

Mr. Hadley made her a bow across the table. "Capital!" he said. "I surrender."

"If you knew how my cousin Kate stands up for everything connected with her own part of the country, you'd surrender in advance any attempt to impress her with the beauties of ours," said Stella, laughing. "Talk of loyalty to one's home!"

"Well, you certainly have a remarkably fine section of country out your way," said Mr. Hadley, graciously. "My father was there buying grain one summer, and I remember he came back perfectly enthusiastic over everything except the ague, which he brought home with him, and had hard work to get rid of. I suppose you'll admit that you do have some chills and fever lying round in your low lands."

"Oh, people have to have something," said Kate, carelessly "but ague isn't the worst thing that ever was. People very seldom die of it, and it's really the most interesting disease in the world. I could give you a list as long as my arm of the ingenious ways

country people have of curing it; and some of them are perfectly fascinating, they're so queer. You ought to hear my father talk about ague."

There was an explosion of laughter at this. "Kate," cried Stella, "you're as bad as the old woman who was challenged to find a good quality in his Satanic majesty, and immediately said there was nothing like his perseverance. But really, if one must discuss chills and fever, don't you think they're a little, just a little plebeian?"

"Oh," said Kate, "anything's plebeian — if you've a mind to call it so — that keeps people moping and ailing. But there are lots of things more 'ornary' than chills. It was when they were all coming down with them, don't you know, that Mark Tapley found the first chance he ever had to be 'jolly' when 'twas really a credit to him!"

The laughter took a note of applause now from Mr. Hadley. "Miss Saxon," he exclaimed, turning to Stella, "don't let's press her any further; she's positively making a classic of the ague. If she says much more, we shall all be wanting to go out there for the express purpose of getting it."

"But ten chances to one you wouldn't get it, if you did," said Kate. "As a matter of fact, we don't have much of it nowadays. It was part of the

newness of the country, and draining the land has carried most of it off."

There was nothing to be said to this. She was in possession of the field at both ends, and they retreated from the subject with a last volley of laughter.

After supper Tom told Kate confidentially that she had "done 'em up in good style. Though I'll warrant," he added severely, "that you'd brag as much as anybody if you had some of the old places we have out your way." And then he observed that the nabob wasn't half bad. He didn't know as 'twas strange that the girls had taken such a fancy to him.

As it happened, Esther was thinking of him at that very moment. She had just finished reading a letter from Morton Elwell, — a letter written, as he happened to mention, before five one morning of a day that was to be full of work. How well she knew that it was one of many — days that followed each other without break or pause save for the Sabbath's rest! And then she thought of Mr. Philip Hadley with his summer devices for "killing time." She wondered why life should be so easy for some, so strenuous for others; and, for the first time, she thought of it with a sort of resentment that Morton Elwell should work so hard and have no summer pleasuring.

CHAPTER XI.

AN OUTING AND AN INVITATION.

THE next week came that never-to-be-forgotten outing which gave the Northmore girls their first glimpse of Boston, and their first acquaintance with the sea. Till the morning they started there was no talk of anything else. Stella, who knew better than her cousins what occasion might demand of dress in a stylish watering-place, bent all her artistic skill to the revising of garments, and even Kate and Esther, whose wardrobes were mostly new, found some chance for retouchings, some need of new laces and ribbons.

For the first time since their coming, their grandfather really felt himself a little neglected. Occasionally, as he passed through the room where the three girls sat busy with sewing and the eager discussion of styles and colors, he murmured solemnly, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity;" and he not only prayed feelingly at family devotions that the young of his household might learn to adorn themselves with "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit," but he selected once for

his morning reading a chapter in which warnings were pronounced against those who set their hearts on "changeable suits of apparel, and mantles, and wimples, and crisping-pins." However, he was as anxious as any one that his granddaughters should enjoy themselves, and his good-will toward this particular excursion was sufficiently indicated by the trifle which he quietly added to the pin-money of each when they started off.

It does not concern our story, and would take too long to tell all the sights and happenings of the days that followed. Never did two more interested or more appreciative girls than Kate and Esther Northmore walk about the streets of Boston, or take in the meanings and memories which it held in its keeping, and in its dear vicinity.

At Cambridge, as they walked about the grounds of Harvard, whom should they meet but Mr. Philip Hadley? A remarkable coincidence it seemed at the time, though Kate remembered later that Stella had set out with tolerable distinctness the time when they expected to be there, with other details of the Boston visit, that night at the farm.

After that, he had part in all their excursions, and a charming addition he made to the party. Stella was a good chaperon, but he was even better, for he had the *entree* of a dozen places which they could not have

entered without him, and whether it was acquaintance, or a liberal use of money, never were more gracious attentions bestowed on a party of sight-seers. He was really a delightful companion; a good talker, a good listener, and so perfectly at leisure that he was ready to act on the slightest hint of anything that interested the others.

It was a suggestion of Stella's, and a lucky one, as she congratulated herself, which led to the most unexpected incident of the whole visit. They had been talking, she and Mr. Hadley, of Copleys, as they walked through the Boston art gallery, and he had mentioned suddenly that there was one in his own home; after which came the quick invitation to make a visit that afternoon to the house on Beacon Street.

The others accepted with no special emotion, but Stella was radiant, and, Bostonian as she called herself, it was she who felt most curiosity when they stood, a few hours later, before the door which bore the name of Hadley, in the long row of brown stone fronts. The house was closed for the summer, and Mr. Hadley had made no attempt to open any rooms except the library, but *this!* It occupied all one side of the long hall on the second floor; a room filled with books and pictures and marbles. "A perfect place," as Stella declared, clasping her hands in a transport of artistic satisfaction.

There were books on books. Indeed, the Northmore girls, accustomed as they were to a fair library at home, had not realized that so many books were ever gathered in one room, outside of public places; and there were pictures beside pictures. There was a Corot at which the heir of the house had not even hinted; and the Copley hung beside a celebrated Millais. Whether the young man most enjoyed the keen appreciation of Stella, or the frank, delighted wonder of the others, is a question. He did the honors of the place with the easy indifference of one to the manner born, and it seemed a mere matter of course, when he called the attention of his guests to one choice possession after another, to rare old copies of books and de luxe editions.

Stella's delight seemed to mount with every moment, but Esther grew so quiet at last that the others rallied her on her soberness. She flushed when Stella declared that she looked almost melancholy, and said, with a glance at the shelves, that one should not be expected to be merry in such company.

But, truth to tell, her thoughts had company just then that no other knew. There had come back to her, oddly perhaps, the memory of a day when Morton Elwell showed her the shelf of books in his little room. It was not a handsome shelf — he had made it him-

self; and the books he had bought, one after another, with savings which meant wearing the old hat and the patch on the boots. How proud he was of those books! There was no easy indifference in his manner as he stood before them with his shining face, and his hand had almost trembled as he passed it caressingly over their plain cloth bindings.

The servant in charge of the house presently answered Mr. Hadley's ring by bringing up a tray with the daintiest of lunches, and he himself set steaming the samovar which stood in a cosey corner. He could preside over pretty china almost as gracefully as Stella herself, when it came to that. Altogether it was a delectable hour which they spent in that library, and the girls all said so in their various fashions when they parted with Mr. Hadley. Esther, perhaps, said it with more feeling than either of the others. She felt as if she had been part of something she had dreamed of all her life, and yet — it was almost provoking, too — that old, insistent memory had half spoiled the dream.

From Boston to Nahant was the move next on their programme. The place was in its glory then, one of the prettiest of the seaside resorts; and for a week they did everything that anybody does at the shore.

Oh, the delight of it all! The pleasure of sitting on the level sands and watching the tides creep in and

out; the transports and trepidations of the first dip into the great salt bath, and the unimagined joy of flying over the bright blue water under sails stretched by a glorious breeze! If anything *could* have made Kate waver in her conviction that her native state was best favored of all in the length and breadth of the land, it would have been, at moments, the thought of its distance from the sea; and it was a long, devouring look, almost a tearful look, that she sent back at the blue expanse when the hour came to leave it.

The outing had been a complete success, from beginning to end. They were too tired to talk of it, as they rode on the train back to Esterly. To look musingly out of the windows was all that any of them cared to do. But words came fast again as they rode back to the farm with their grandfather, who was waiting for them, of course, at the depot; and faster still when, with Tom and Aunt Elsie as listeners, they were all seated at the family supper.

"We've had more fun than we expected, positively more," Kate exclaimed, "and I shall never take a bit of stock again in that idea that thinking about things beforehand is better than actually having them. It must have been started by somebody who was too old to enjoy things."

And her grandfather, after grunting a little over

the last clause, and calling attention to the fact that *he*, at least, had never seen the time when he could say of any rational enjoyments, "I have no pleasure in them," was inclined to agree with the sentiment.

"Things don't turn out just as you expect them to, of course," he remarked reflectively. "I never knew it to happen that a body didn't miss *something* of what he'd counted on, but then, on the other hand, something's sure to turn up that you warn't looking for, and you must set one over against the other. There are worse things than old age to keep folks from enjoying themselves," he added acutely, "and one of them is being so taken up with yourself that you feel abused if your own plans don't work out to a T. For my part, I shouldn't wonder if there was more pleasure to be got out of surprises, anyhow."

The allusion to unexpected things of course suggested the meeting with Mr. Hadley, and then followed a full account of all his subsequent attentions. The old gentleman was delighted, and wished he could have been with them when they made that visit to the house on Beacon Street, a wish which it is doubtful whether the girls fully shared. They did not demur to it, however, nor yet to his evident impression that the young man's gratitude for the light which had been thrown on the history of his forefathers had

led him to extend these pleasant courtesies to his, Ruel Saxon's, descendants.

Tom was the first to suggest the doubt. "Say, did the nabob talk all the time about his ancestors?" he demanded of Kate, as they sat on the wood-pile after supper, a perch to which she declared she was glad to come back after her fortnight's absence.

"Of course he didn't," she replied. "I don't think he spoke of them once, except when he showed us some of their portraits in the library."

"I thought so," said Tom, kicking a birch stick down from the pile, and sending it with accurate aim against the instrument which he called a "saw-horse" and she called a "saw-buck." Then, looking her in the eyes, he asked coolly, "Which of 'em is it, Stelle or Esther?"

"Both of 'em, I reckon," said Kate, with equal coolness.

"It'll be one of them in particular if it keeps on like this," said Tom, "and I'll bet a shilling it'll be Esther."

For once she did not take up the wager. It had been thrown down between them so often during the summer that nothing had prevented their both becoming bankrupt except the standing quarrel as

to the amount involved, Tom maintaining steadily that it was sixteen and two-third cents, one sixth of a dollar, and she insisting with equal obstinacy that it was twelve and a half. This time she let it pass.

"Tom, you're a goose," she said severely; and then she added: "I suppose you don't think it's possible that he's at all impressed with *me*. I'd like to have you know that we had a great deal of conversation. Why" — she threw a shade of weariness into her voice — "I had to go over most of the ground that I've been going over with you ever since I came. We had *r* up, of course. I really could not help speaking of it. One would think there was something actually profane about that poor little letter, the way the Bostonians avoid using it. And when I'd fairly made out my case, and he couldn't deny it, he had to pretend, just as you do, that we Westerners make too much of it, when we don't at all; and as if *that* was any answer!"

"The way you do," observed Tom, sympathetically, "when I show you that you folks mix up the wills and shalls so there's no telling which from t'other, and you get back at me by declaring that we say 'hadn't ought' and a few things of that sort."

And then they fell to it again in the old fashion, Kate protesting the absolute incapacity of the aver-

age mind for grasping the fine distinctions between those two auxiliaries, which, thank Heaven, have still not wholly lost their special uses on our Eastern coast, and finally, after various thrusts at local usage, ending with the charge that New Englanders more than dwellers in the West are guilty of dropping from their speech the final *g*, a point on which the impartial listener might possibly have thought that she had a little the best of it.

And while the good-natured dispute went on, another and more important conversation was being held in the house on the old county road, where Esther sat with Aunt Katharine in the growing twilight. She had slipped away from her grandfather's as soon as supper was over to make the call. There had been so many of these calls since her three days' visit there that no one was surprised at them any more or offered to accompany her. It was recognized by all that there was something of genuine intimacy between these two, an intimacy at which every one smiled except Kate, whose dislike of her lonely old relative seemed to increase with her sister's fondness.

Aunt Katharine had heard the click of the gate as the girl came up, and for once she had hobbled down the walk to greet a guest. There was almost

a hungry look in her eyes as they searched the bright young face, and her brother had not inquired more eagerly than she for the particulars of the trip. And Esther went over it all, with a cheery pleasure that warmed her listener's heart, talking as she might have talked to her mother of the things she had seen and felt, gayly, without reserve, and sure always of the interest of the other.

It was a rare hour to Aunt Katharine. Not in years had any fresh young life brought its happiness so willingly to her, and her heart responded with a glow and fulness like the sudden out-leaping of a brook in the spring.

At the last Esther had said, a little wistfully, that she was glad these days had come so late in this summer visit. It was almost ended now, but its climax of pleasure had been reached, and the memory of it would be a joy forever.

"Do you have to go back, both of you, the first of September?" Aunt Katharine asked suddenly. "Why couldn't *you* stay a while longer? They don't need you at home for anything special, do they?"

The idea took definite shape as she caught the outlines of it, and her keen eyes kindled. "You like things here better 'n Kate does, and you're older. S'pose you should stay at the farm and see what a

New England fall is like — you can't know your mother's country without knowing that — and then spend the winter in Boston with Stella. She'd like it, and she'd let you into a lot of things you want to know about. I never cared much for pictures and music and such, but you do; and you or' to have a taste of 'em while you're young."

She paused, and Esther said with a gasp: "Oh, that would be glorious, glorious! But the expense of it, Aunt Katharine! Father couldn't possibly afford to let me do it, and I couldn't pay my own way, you know, as Stella does."

"I wasn't counting on your father's bearing the expense, nor you either," said Miss Saxon, dryly. "I guess I could afford to do that much for you, and a few other things too, if you took a notion to 'em." And then a tenderer note crept into her voice as she added, "I missed most of the things I wanted when I was a girl, and I'd like to make sure of it that *you* fared better."

There was no talking for a minute or two after that. The delights that seemed to open before Esther through the avenues of this plan almost took her breath away, and the generosity that proposed it made her eyes dim with tears. It was Aunt Katharine, not she, who could discuss it coolly, and to the

old woman the thought seemed to grow every moment dearer. There were friends of hers in Boston — not Stella's friends, she added, with a peculiar smile — people who would be good to Esther for her sake. Perhaps Esther would come to feel toward them as she herself did, and then she looked at the girl for a moment as if taking her measure with reference to something larger than she knew.

The dew was falling and the whippoorwills were calling across the hills through the twilight that had deepened almost into night when Esther rose at last to go home. She had never kissed Aunt Katharine before, but the old woman drew her face down to hers and held it for an instant as she bade her good night. Then she said almost brusquely: —

"You'd better hurry home now. They'll think I've lost my wits entirely to be keeping you so long. And you've got that letter to write to your mother. Tell her everything, and be sure it goes in the morning."

And Esther, with feet almost as light as the wings of the night birds, hurried across the fields to tell the surprising news to the two circles — the household at home, and the one at her grandfather's.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK.

IT was a long letter that went to Mrs. Northmore the next morning. Indeed, there were three; for Stella, in her delight over the prospect of keeping Esther, filled a sheet with an ecstatic picture of the joys which a winter in Boston would surely furnish, and Ruel Saxon supplied another, impressing upon his daughter his own deep satisfaction in the thought of having one of her children with him a little longer, and adding tenderly that since she herself went out of the home so long ago, no young presence there had been as dear and comforting to him as this of Esther.

He had been amazed when the girl brought the news of Aunt Katharine's proposal, and certainly nothing in his sister's behavior for years had pleased him as much. He visited her promptly the next morning to assure her of his approval, and congratulate her (as he told Aunt Elsie) on having for once acted with such eminent good sense. But either he

did not do it in the most tactful manner, or he found his sister in an unfortunate mood, for it appeared from his own account of it that, after the brightest preliminaries, she had proceeded to air her most obnoxious views; views which, as he pensively declared, he had smitten hip and thigh and put utterly to rout more than once; and he ended his report of the interview with an expression of irritated wonder as to how so amiable a girl as Esther Northmore ever came to be a favorite with her Aunt Katharine Saxon.

But there was one person who found it even harder than he to understand the partiality. This was Kate; and in her the wonder was mingled with a sort of resentment which she could not throw off. She alone of the household had not rejoiced when her sister came in that night with the announcement of the invitation which seemed to her such great good fortune. There was no touch of envy in it. To the exclamation of all, "If Kate could only stay, too!" she had responded with perfect honesty, "I don't want to. I've had a splendid time here; but I'm about ready to go home now, and I wouldn't stay away longer than we planned if I could."

It was none of her business perhaps, — she said it to herself again and again, — but she did not like

the growing influence which Aunt Katharine was gaining over Esther. It did not matter so much while the intimacy was thought to be only passing, and going home lay in the near distance, but to leave her sister behind, within touch of this masterful spirit, and all the more open to her influence through receiving her favors, *this* was a prospect before which Kate chafed with a growing uneasiness. That thing which Tom had told her so long ago, which had only amused her then, that Aunt Katharine had said she would leave her money to that one of her female relatives who would promise never to marry, came back to her now to vex and trouble her. That the woman would definitely make so bald a proposal, or that the girl would definitely accept it, were suggestions which at moments seemed too foolish to entertain; she could brush them aside with scorn; and then, in some new form, they would come creeping back. If not a definite proposal, a formal promise, there might be tacit understanding, something which would rest upon the girl and bind her as subtly as any pledge. Poor Kate! She could not even understand her own state of mind. Was it love of Esther? Was it thought of Morton Elwell, and a haunting sense of a hope which she felt sure he carried deep in his heart? Or was it simply the re-

volt of a spirit as stout as Aunt Katharine's own against the possibility of any bondage, for her sister as for herself?

As the days went on — the days before the letter came from home which finally settled the question — she grew restless and depressed. Even the disputes with Tom fell off, and he rallied her sometimes on her lack of spirit.

"I believe it's the notion of going West again that makes you so down in the mouth, for all you pretend you're so keen to go," he said to her once, as they were tramping home in the late afternoon from the wood-lot, where they had gone in search of sassafras.

She tossed her head. "You know better," she said, "and between ourselves and the post you aren't so very lively yourself lately. I believe you'd like to go home with me and grow up with the West a while."

They exchanged a good-natured laugh. There was no denying that there were moments when the thought of parting with his cousin Kate really depressed Tom Saxon. She had the next word, and she said it with unaffected seriousness.

"Honestly, Tom, I don't know what ails me. If I could have a good out-and-out cry I believe I could get over it; but there isn't anything really to cry about. I'll

tell you how I do sometimes at home, when I feel blue. I get down Dickens, and read the death of little Nell, or how they killed Sydney Carton, or something awfully harrowing like that, you know, and then I have it out and feel better. But you haven't got Dickens here," she added ruefully.

"Grandfather's got Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs,'" said Tom, grinning, and then he added, in a tone of curiosity, "Do *you* cry over books?" It was a feminine weakness which he had not suspected of Kate.

"Cry!" she repeated. "Yes, I do; and I don't care who knows it. I'll tell you how I got through 'Nicholas Nickleby.' It used me up so every time I read how Squeers treated those poor fellows in his school that I couldn't stand it. Well, I knew he got his come-up-ance from Nicholas in the end, so every time I read one of those mean places, I'd just turn ahead and read how Nicholas flogged him. I reckon I must have read that scene a dozen times before I fairly came to it, and it did me more good every time. I believe that story would have killed me if I hadn't."

There was plenty of fight in Kate. Tom had known that for some time. That there were tears, too, need not have surprised any one but a boy, and he liked her none the less for it. She gave a long

sigh, and came back to her own troubles. The sympathetic tone in which Tom said, "I wish I could do something for you," was a comfort in itself, and the need of talking to some one drew her on.

"Right down at the bottom of it, Tom, I suppose it's the thought of going home without Esther; and yet it isn't because I hate to leave her behind. I shall miss her, of course; but I could stand that. She was off at school a whole year and I didn't pine for her so dreadfully much. But — but it's Aunt Katharine! Tom, I can't bear to have Esther get so intimate with Aunt Katharine."

She had actually said it now, and for the rest of the way home she poured out her heart with a girlish freedom. Perhaps her feelings grew more clear to herself as she tried to make them plain to him. He understood better than she expected, and fully agreed with her as to the undesirability of Aunt Katharine's "making a slave of Esther"; but he thought her fears on this point much exaggerated, and it was good advice that he gave her as they neared the house.

"If I was in your place I wouldn't worry about it. I guess Aunt Katharine's got some sense if she *is* so cranky. And Esther's old enough to know what she's about. Just leave her alone to get sick

of some of those notions herself before she's done with 'em, and you ease up on the fretting. It doesn't do a bit of good, anyhow."

She really meant to "ease up." Tom's opinion on the last point was distinctly sound, but the old disquiet had possession of her again within five minutes from the time that conversation ended. The letter had come from home — she learned it as she entered the house — giving hearty consent that Esther should remain in New England, and the girl was already off to carry the word to Aunt Katharine. She had said she would be back soon, but no one really expected it, and supper was over before they saw her coming across the fields. Kate, who was watching, saw her first, and slipping out of the house hurried to meet her.

She had brought happy thoughts from Aunt Katharine's, happy and serious too, it would seem from the look in her face, and they occupied her so intently that she had almost met her sister before she saw her coming. Then she put out both her hands with an eager greeting.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "I wanted to talk it over a little by ourselves." She slipped her arm through Kate's, and turned back into the darkening fields. "You weren't surprised at what the

letter said, were you? I was sorry you weren't there when it came; but I had to take it down to Aunt Katharine, for it was partly to her, and I couldn't wait."

"No, I wasn't surprised. I felt sure they'd let you stay," said Kate, and then she added, "I do hope you'll have a good time, Esther, and enjoy everything as much as you expect to."

She had made an effort to speak heartily, but there was such a sober note in her voice that Esther's face clouded, and she looked quickly at her sister. "If you were only going to be here too, Kate, it would be perfect," she said. "I shall be wishing all the way along that you were in the good times with me. And if you hadn't said so positively that you wanted to go home, I should have felt like proposing to Aunt Katharine to cut my time in Boston in two and let us be there together for a little while."

"I shouldn't have thanked you for it if you had," said Kate, a sudden impatience leaping into her voice. Then, with a bitterness she ought to have kept down, she added, "I don't like Aunt Katharine, and I don't want her favors."

The look in Esther's face changed. "You don't do Aunt Katharine justice, Kate," she said. "Nobody does here. She isn't hateful and hard-hearted,

as you all seem to think. She's good and kind and true — oh, so true! I believe she'd do more and give more than any other person I ever saw to bring about what she thinks is right. I don't know, I'm sure, how she came to like me, but I know why I like her. I admire her and I love her, and there's nobody in the world I'd rather take a favor from than Aunt Katharine."

Kate set her teeth hard. She had prejudiced everything she had meant to say by the heat with which she had spoken. She was silent a moment, then she said almost piteously: "I don't wonder she likes you. But I may as well be honest, Esther; I do hate to see her getting such an influence over you. It's all well enough to admire her for standing up for her own opinions, but I don't see how *you* can fall in with some of them. I don't see how you can bear it to hear her talk so bitterly against the ways we've always been used to. And especially I don't see how you can stand it to hear her run down the men as she does."

"I don't agree with all her opinions," said Esther, quickly, "but I can see how she comes to hold them, and she doesn't always talk as harshly as you think. But it isn't her opinions any way; it's her own self that I care about."

"And you'll end by wanting to look at everything just as she does, because you like her so much and feel so indebted to her," said Kate. Then, with an accent that was fairly tragic, she added: "Oh, she knows it, she knows it, and that's what she wants to keep you here for! She'll end by wanting you never to marry, and offering to leave you all her money if you'll promise not to do it."

Esther drew her arm away from her sister, and the flush that swept over her face was plain even in the twilight. "I think you'd better leave all that to Aunt Katharine and me. It doesn't strike me as coming under your charge," she said proudly. And then the coldness in her voice melted with a sudden heat as she added: "But suppose I *should* come to see things as she does — suppose I *should* come to take a different view of life from what I did once, what then? I'll go where my honest convictions lead me. It's my right and my duty, and I shall do it."

It sounded very brave and solemn in the twilight. A whippoorwill from the woods behind Aunt Katharine's house had the only word that followed, and he called it across the stillness with a long soft cadence that sounded like a wail.

They turned their faces to the house and walked toward it without speaking. It was a relief to both when Stella came out to meet them.

"I thought you were never coming," she said to Esther. "Dear me, I shall be glad when I get you in Boston, with Aunt Katharine too far away to use her magnet on you."

A half hour later Kate was in conference with Tom again. She had called him into the shadows of the barn, and her voice was almost a whisper as she said: —

"Tom, I want you to wake me up to-morrow morning when you come down to do the milking. I'm going to make a call before breakfast."

Tom gave a low whistle. "At that time in the morning! Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To Aunt Katharine's," she said.

Tom gave another whistle, this time a louder one. "Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "So you're going to keep it right up, are you?"

"I'm going to keep it up till I've had one good square talk with her," said Kate, with decision. "Very likely it's none of my business, — you've told me that, and so has Esther, — but she's tremendously clear that she's got to follow her conscience where it leads her, and mine leads *me* right down there to Aunt

Katharine's. I can't go home without doing it, and there's only a week longer for me to stay, so I may as well take time by the forelock."

"I should think it was taking time by the forelock with a vengeance to go down there at five o'clock. Why don't you go at a reasonable hour?" growled Tom.

Kate was losing patience. "Because I don't want Esther to know I'm going," she said. "If I go later she might happen to come in while I'm there, or she might ask me where I'd been. No, I've made up my mind to go before breakfast, and all you have to do is to wake me up."

"I'd like to know how I'm going to do it without waking her, too," he said.

"Oh, I'll fix that part," she replied, beginning to smile a little. "Of course you can't pound on the door; but I've got a trick worth two of that. I'll tie a string round my wrist and let the end hang out of the window. Then, when you come by, you can pull it and that'll wake me up. I waked a girl that way once, on Fourth of July (only the string was round her ankle), and she slept so like a log that she said I almost pulled her out of the window before she was fairly awake. But you needn't be afraid of pulling me out. Just give a twitch and I shall feel it. I sleep on the front side."

"All right," said Tom, and then he could not help adding, "but I'll tell you now that your going down there won't do a bit of good, and you'd better keep out of it."

"It'll do *me* good to free my mind," said Kate. "And after that I mean to take your advice, Tom, and quit worrying."

The allusion to his advice was gratifying. Tom agreed to administer the twitch at half-past four the next morning, and they separated, feeling like a pair of conspirators, Kate at least clear in the opinion that she was conspiring for the good of humanity.

She lay awake so long that night, turning in her mind what she would say to Aunt Katharine, and never getting it settled, for the singular reason that she could never foresee what Aunt Katharine would say next, that it seemed to her she had not been asleep at all when there came the appointed signal in the cool of the morning. For a moment she had a passing dream that some one was trying to amputate her hand with a wood-saw, then it all came back to her. Her eyes flew open, and she crept stealthily out of bed. A flutter of the curtain showed Tom she was astir, but after that there was as little flutter as possible.

She slipped into her clothes as noiselessly as a ghost, with fearful glances at Esther, who slept on in

serene oblivion of the plot against her, carried her shoes in her hand to the foot of the stairs, and went out through the kitchen, where even Aunt Elsie had not yet made her appearance. At the barn she paused a minute for a word with Tom and a cup of new milk, then flew down the lane, anxious still lest some one, looking unseasonably from the house, should see her, till the bend of the first hill hid her from view.

Some one has acutely remarked that people who break their usual habits by rising very early in the morning are apt to be a little conceited in the first part of the day and somewhat stupid in the last. There was certainly no lack of self-assurance in Kate Northmore, as she took that walk across the dewy fields, with the fresh air blowing on her face, and the twitter of birds sounding from the woods. Not till she actually stood at Aunt Katharine's threshold was there any tremor of her nerves or any flutter at her heart.

Miss Saxon herself answered the knock, and a look of something like alarm came into her face as she saw the caller. "Is anybody sick at your house?" she asked quickly.

Kate had not foreseen the question. "No," she said, taken a little aback. "Nobody's sick, but I wanted to see you, and I thought I'd come early."

"I should think so," ejaculated the old woman, her

face relaxing into a grim sort of a smile. "Well, come in and se' down."

She had no notion of preparing the way for the announcement of a pressing errand, or of hindering it by any observations of her own, and she took the chair opposite Kate's with her hands clasped on the top of her cane, waiting in perfect silence for the girl to begin.

Kate's heart began to thump now, and her mouth felt suddenly dry. "I'm going home in a week," she said, "and I — I wanted to talk about something with you before I went." And then suddenly she stopped. There was a queer sort of clutch at her throat, and for a minute she could not go on.

The old woman's eyebrows bent themselves into a puzzled frown. "Well," she said at last, "you hain't favored me with much of your company this summer. If you've got any particular reason for coming now, I s'pose you know what 'tis."

The sharpness of her tone brought Kate back to herself. "Yes'm I do," she said, "and it's about Esther. You've asked her to stay here and she's going to do it — no, I don't want to stay myself," — she threw in quickly. "I'm ready to go home; but *she* wants to. She thinks it's glorious." And then she stopped again, that unaccountable clutch at the throat coming for a second time.

"And you don't want her to do it? Is that what you're driving at?" said Aunt Katharine. She was in no mood now for delays.

"I should just as lief she'd do it as not — I want her to have a good time," cried Kate, "if — if you only wouldn't try to make her think as you do about some things."

It was out now, and the clutch at her throat relaxed.

"Oh," said Miss Saxon. There was a volume of meaning in the monosyllable as she spoke it, and then her face grew cold and sharp as an icicle. "What things?"

It was really a pity that Kate was not better informed as to her aunt's peculiar views. But she caught at the one which had offended her most, and thrust it forward roughly. "About hating everything, especially the men," she cried, "and not wanting girls to be married. They say you want to leave your money to somebody who'll promise to stay single all her life."

Miss Saxon started, and a faint pink color rose in her cheeks, old and wrinkled as they were. "Did your sister tell you that?" she demanded.

"No," said Kate, "I don't know as she ever heard of it till I told her. I told her last night, and how I felt about it, too."

"And she said — ?" queried Miss Saxon. The pink was still in her cheeks.

"Well," said Kate — she hesitated a moment and then looked straight at the questioner — "she as good as said it was none of my business, and she'd do what she thought was right whatever came of it."

"Ah!" said Aunt Katharine, with an accent of relief. "And I presume you didn't tell her that you were coming here this morning. I see now why you came so early." She looked at her niece with a faint sarcastic smile, then said coldly, "I am very fond of your sister."

The words sounded somehow like a threat. The blood mounted in Kate's face, and she clinched her hands on the sides of her chair. "I know it," she said, "and so is every one else fond of her. Grandfather likes her just as much as you do. Perhaps it's new for you to care for a girl as you care for her, but it's no new thing for Esther. It's been the way ever since she was little."

The bearing of the fact on Kate's ground of quarrel with her aunt was perhaps not clear, but some fine wrinkles gathered in Miss Saxon's forehead.

"And does Esther like everybody?" she asked, with a returning sharpness.

"She keeps it to herself if she doesn't," said Kate.

"She's kind to everybody — most everybody," she added, with a sudden remembrance of the one person to whom Esther had not of late seemed always kind. "And that's how she gets into trouble, making everybody like her, with her soft pleasant ways and saying nice things. Oh, I've had to stand up for her so many times to keep her from being imposed on! I'm standing up for her now," she went on passionately. "It's your *ideas* you care about, and you want her to take up with them, whether they'll make her happy or not. But I care for *her*, and I want to make you stop."

The old woman's face had grown as tense as a drawn bow. "So you think my ideas are getting hold of her, do you?" she asked.

"*She* thinks they are," cried Kate, "but I don't believe it. I believe it's just because she thinks so much of you. But if she *should* come to feel as you do about all those things, what good would it do? She couldn't fight for them. Do you think there's any fight in Esther Northmore?" She threw out her hand with an impatient gesture. "Oh, they say you're so clever! But you're not clever at all if you think *that*. She'd bear things till they broke her heart before she'd fight."

Miss Saxon's lips were drawn tight, and her eyes

narrowed to a bright dark line, as if these side-lights that Kate had been throwing on Esther's character had blinded her a little. She did not speak for a moment, and the girl went on hotly, even fiercely.

"You talk about wanting women to be so free and independent, but you want to bind Esther to those ideas of yours and make her carry them out. I'll tell you what would be the end of it if she should come into your plan. She'd stand by what she promised, but 'twould kill her. She's made for loving, and for caring about the things we've always cared about, and she wouldn't be happy any other way. She isn't that kind."

Aunt Katharine's lips parted now. They seemed to be as dry as Kate's had been a little while ago. She leaned forward on her cane and asked a question slowly. "You pretend to know so much about your sister, tell me, do you think there's anybody she cares for now?"

Kate dropped her head for a moment, but it was no time for evasions. The excitement and strain of the situation were too much for her at last. "No, I don't," she said, with the tears springing into her eyes. "But there's somebody that cares a sight for her; and if she should ever come to care for him she'd be a thousand times happier than she'd ever

be with anything *you* could do for her. Oh, if you should make her promise — if you should leave your money to her — I should hate you as long as I live, and she would hate you, too, after a while."

Miss Katharine Saxon rose from her seat. She had not been as straight in years, but she trembled from head to foot as she stood there facing the girl.

"Katharine Northmore, — for you're my namesake, if you do hate me, — " she said slowly, "you've said enough. You took upon yourself to do a very impertinent thing when you came down here to give instructions to me. I shall walk by the light I've got, and do my duty as I see it, by myself and your sister too. Now go home. And you needn't be afraid I shall tell Esther you were here. I shan't shame her nor myself by ever speaking of it."

But when she was left alone she sank back in her chair, and there was almost a sob in her voice as she said, "If it were only *that* girl who saw things as I see them!"

CHAPTER XIII.

INTO THE WEST AGAIN.

THE good cry which Kate had been longing for came before she got back to her grandfather's that morning. She took it with a girlish abandon, sitting on the meadow bridge. Then she rose up, bathed her face in the brook and went on her way, half ashamed of what she had done, half wondering that she had dared to do it, and wholly glad that it was over. Tom was waiting for her at the bars below the barn. It helped the appearance of things that she should go in with him to breakfast, and, though he would have scorned to own it, Tom had a healthy curiosity as to the outcome of this interview with Aunt Katharine.

Kate's report of it was meagre; but the impression was left on his mind that she had gotten rather the worst of it, especially as she made no concealment of the fact that she had been summarily dismissed at the end. She owned frankly that she had been crying, and then showed plainly that the spirit of controversy

was not dead in her yet by the reckless manner in which she threw in her "Westernisms" and defended them during the rest of their talk. On the whole, Tom felt relieved as to her state of mind, and they went into the house quarrelling in the most natural manner; she having remarked that Aunt Katharine's fierce manner didn't "faze" her after she got started, and he protesting that there was no such word in the dictionary. He maintained his point as far as the old Webster in the house was concerned, but she at least proved that her word came of good respectable stock, and stood firm on the proposition that it *ought* to be there if it wasn't.

It was the last time for many a day that Kate spoke to any one of that morning's adventure. Not a suspicion of it dawned on Esther. The talk between the sisters the night before had been too nearly a quarrel for either of them to wish to reopen the subject which had so disturbed them, and it was out of consideration for Kate's uneasiness over the intimacy with Aunt Katharine that Esther went to her house less often than usual during the next few days. But indeed it was not easy during the week that was left of Kate's stay at her grandfather's for either of the girls to find time for anything except the pleasurings which always crowd the last days of a visit. Every-

thing which had been omitted before must be done now, and there were all the little gifts to be prepared for the family at home, tokens of special meaning for each one, and for Mrs. Northmore most of all.

She had asked for a piece of flag-root from the old spot in the meadow, and enough was dug to satisfy her appetite for years, Aunt Elsie preserving some of it in sugar, just as the grandmother used to in the old days, when children carried bits of it to church in their pockets to keep them awake during sermon time. She had mentioned an apple from the crooked tree in the lane, whose seeds always shook in their core like a rattlebox by the first of September, and every apple which ripened on the old farm in the summer had a place in Kate's trunk. There were odors, too, which she loved; odors of pine, and sweet fern, and life everlasting, to be gathered and sewed into silken bags and pillows; and there was a little bunch — Aunt Elsie tucked it in — of dried hardhack and catnip and spearmint.

"I don't suppose she ever steeped those things for her own babies, being a doctor's wife," she said; "but she knew the taste of them when she was a baby herself, and I guess it'll bring back the old garret to her, and the bunches that hung from the rafters when she and I used to play there on rainy days."

Such were the chief events of that last week, but there was one other of some importance, a call from Mr. Philip Hadley, who did not come this time to inquire for his ancestors, but very distinctly for the young ladies, and the fact that their grandfather was absent did not prevent his making a decidedly long call. He seemed extremely interested in all their doings since he saw them last, and the look of pleasure with which he heard the announcement that Esther was to spend the winter in Boston would have convinced Tom, had he seen it, of the correctness of an opinion he had lately expressed to Kate. It did not affect her, however. It was no young man with soft white hands, but only a grim old woman, whose influence she feared for her sister.

So the days went by, swift, hurrying days, and brought the morning of Kate's departure. Tom would have liked to go with her to the depot, but it was the grandfather, with the girls, of course, who made the trip. They said good-by to each other in a last interview at the barn, and though each tried to be gay and off-hand, the effort was not very successful. They made solemn compact to write to each other often, Tom for his part agreeing to keep his "eye peeled" for any developments concerning Esther, and Kate for hers promising to "watch out" for

anything that could interest him in affairs at the West.

"You must come out and see us, Tom," she said earnestly. "I want to show you everything, and make you like our part of the country as well as — as well as I like this. Your ways are different from ours, of course; but I've got a lot of new ideas, and I've had an awfully good time with you, Tom. I didn't know I *could* feel so bad to go away."

"I guess I should like it out your way too," said Tom, turning his head as if it were not quite safe to look into her eyes at that moment, "and perhaps sometime I can come. I guess it's good for folks to see something besides their own things, and — I *know* I should like it out West if *you* were there."

And then they parted, each of them having apparently some trouble with the throat just then, and Tom drawing his sleeve across his eyes in a suspicious manner as he walked down the lane.

"The Lord bless and keep you and cause His face to shine upon you," Ruel Saxon said solemnly as he bade the girl good-by at the depot.

It was the last word before the train pulled out, for Esther's heart was full, and she could say no more after sending her love for the thousandth time to them all at home. And then the beautiful New

England village, with its lovely homes and shaded streets, faded from Kate's sight; the hills and the little fields, crossed by the old stone walls, rushed past her, and it was the wide green stretches of the home country for which the eyes of her heart were straining as she flew on into the West.

It was a great day for the family when she reached home. The doctor was at the depot, impatient as a boy over the three minutes' delay in the train that brought her in, and he almost forgot to secure her trunk, or set her bag into the carriage, in his delight at seeing her.

"Well, I believe they must have treated you pretty well back there," he said, pinching her cheek. And he would have had her on the scales before she left the depot if she had not protested that she could not spare a second getting weighed.

"I shall lose a pound for every minute we waste getting home," she cried, jumping into the carriage; and at this he laughed, and putting the reins into her hands, told her to get the gray filly over the ground as fast as she pleased. How they did go dashing down the road, and what wonder that excitement was rife in the town that afternoon as to what member of the community was lying at the point of death that the doctor was going at such a rate to see him!

They were on the porch to greet her when she pulled up at the door, Mrs. Northmore and Virgie, with Aunt Milly gorgeous in her best cap and kerchief at the rear; and such a hugging and kissing, such a laughing and crying followed as might have made one wonder what *would* have happened if the girl had stayed away a year instead of a single summer.

It was good to be back — so good; she realized it more with every minute, and the trite old saying that the best part of going away from home is coming back again appealed to her as never before. The trunk was unpacked with all the household gathered round, but no one, not even Mrs. Northmore, daring to help, lest some precious token, tucked safely in by Kate's own hand, should be drawn prematurely from its corner or shaken unwarily from the folds of a dress. Oh, the joy of drawing them out, one after another, and the bursts of delight with which they were received!

Virgie skipped about the room in glee over the trinkets which had been brought to her from Boston and the sea; Dr. Northmore declared he must have coffee made at once to give him a chance of using the beautiful cup which Stella had painted with just such blossoming honeysuckles as grew over the door from which he had carried away his bride; Aunt

Milly stood agape over the glories of the black silk apron which her young ladies had embroidered for her in figures of the gayest colors — Jack Horner enjoying his Christmas pie in one corner, Miss Muffet frightened from her curds by the wicked black spider in another, and the muffin man with his tray on his head stalking proudly between; while as for Mrs. Northmore, she sat like a little child, her lap filling with treasures, nibbling now and then at the flag-root, or burying her face in those dear old odors, and lifting it again with smiles shining through the tears in her eyes.

Not till the very bottom of the trunk had been reached was it emptied of its last gift, and then there was plenty of need for the mother's help; for the putting away of her scattered wardrobe was a task to which Kate could not quiet her excited nerves. She was almost too happy to eat, but the supper Aunt Milly had made ready would have put the edge of appetite on satiety itself.

"Why, Aunt Milly, a body'd think I was a regular prodigal, to have such a feast as this set out for me," she declared, at the close of the meal, when it seemed as if every one of her favorite dainties had been heaped upon her plate in turn, but the old woman shook her head at this with emphasis.

"No ye ain't, honey," she said, "your Aunt Milly never did have no use for prodigals" (she would probably not have recognized any member of her family in that character, however he might have wasted his substance), "but I allers did 'low that them that's a comfort to you were the ones to fix for. 'Pears to me that was a terrible mean-spirited man in the Bible that never let 'em set out a kid or anything for the boy that was so good 'n' steady. *I'd* have done it, if I'd been cookin' for 'em, sure nuff I would."

It was, perhaps, the devoted old servant who had pined most for Kate's return, and it was certainly she who was most anxious to have the girl all to herself now that she had fairly come. Mrs. Northmore could wait. The things she cared most to know would be learned best in the unsolicited confidences of the days that were coming, and she feigned some errand for herself in the edge of evening which gave the girl a chance to sit for a little while in the kitchen, with the old woman questioning her and crooning over her out of the depths of an abounding love.

"We've missed you powerful bad, honey," she said, rocking back and forth, with her eyes fixed in a beaming content on the girl's face. "'Spect they didn't put much of it into the letters, but I tell you

your ma's been mighty lonesome some of the time. I could see it, if the rest couldn't; and your pa — you could tell how *he* felt by the way he fretted if the letters didn't come jes' so often. And 'tween you 'n' me he didn't like it much to have Esther stay all winter, only your ma worked him round, the way she has, you know. Bless your heart, if they'd wanted *you* to stay too, dunno what would 'a' happened to us. 'Spect this yer ole woman would 'a' been dead 'n' gone before spring. I've been pinin' for you all summer."

"But I shouldn't have stayed if they had wanted me," Kate said cheerfully, and then she added with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, "but really, Aunt Milly, you don't look as if you had been pining. It rather seems to me you've grown a little stouter since we went away."

"Laws now, Miss Kate," cried Aunt Milly, "that's jes' some o' your jokin'." Then, smoothing her ample front with an uneasy expression, she added beseechingly: "But you can't tell by the looks o' folks what's goin' on inside of 'em. I was powerful puny a spell back. Your pa'll tell you how much medicine he giv' me." Then, her face brightening again: "But you or' to see the way I began to pick up when the day was set for you to come home. 'Peared like the misery jes'

cleared out of itself, an' I reckon I did get back the flesh I lost, with maybe a little more," she ended serenely.

"Well, I hope the misery'll stay away for good, now I've come," said Kate, laughing. The sound of voices in the hall told her that a bevy of friends had come to welcome her home, and with another smile at Milly she was off to meet them, and to begin all over again the account of her beautiful summer.

The warmth with which the Western town greets its returning children is one of the pleasant things to have known in one's journey through life. For the next few days Kate's time was full, responding to the welcome of her friends, asking and answering questions, and adjusting herself again to her own place.

There was one friend for whom she inquired early, and of him Mrs. Elwell brought the fullest report when she brought her own greeting to the girl next morning. Morton had hardly been at home all summer. He had been busy, first at one thing, then another, as Kate knew, and now — it was quite a sudden move — he was with an engineering party in an adjoining county. It seemed he had given some special attention to surveying during the last year in college, and, like everything else he gave his mind to, had it so well in hand that it turned to his use and

advantage. The work would keep him a few weeks longer, which would make him late in getting back to school, but the pay was so good he had felt he must make the most of his chance. She gave one of those little sighs which every one understood when she talked of her nephew, and then her face brightened as she added, "But he'll certainly come home before he goes back to college, and we shall see him before so very long."

At which Kate's face brightened too. There was no one now whom she wanted so much to see as Morton Elwell.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NABOB MAKES AN IMPRESSION.

IT was a divided stream in which the current of our story flowed during the days that followed, and a quiet stream it seemed at first after the dash and sparkle of the summer. A week more and Kate was busy with her books again, beginning her last year in the Rushmore High School. Tom Saxon was in school too, and Stella had flitted back to Boston, ready to settle down in that pretty studio of hers, with her art and her pupils. Esther alone was at leisure, but even for her the time passed swiftly. Aunt Elsie gave her a willing share in the light work of the household, and her grandfather claimed her more and more as a companion in all his goings, and a listener to his tales in the lengthening evenings.

Then there were the visits to Aunt Katharine, and few were the days in which they were omitted. The sight of the girl always brought a smile to the face of the lonely old woman. She was, if possible, more kind than ever, and yet, though Esther could not

have explained it, she felt with a puzzled wonder that there was somehow a difference. Not for long had Aunt Katharine talked in the old passionate way of those peculiar views which she held so dear and vital. She seemed less eager than once to impress them, and Esther noted it, resenting more and more that fancy of her sister's that the proud-spirited old woman would have taken undue advantage of her influence, or have wished to put compulsion on another's life and thought.

It was a pity Kate did not know the true state of the case. As it was she sent an anxious thought every now and then in the direction of Aunt Katharine, and shook her fist, metaphorically speaking, in the face of those ideas which she imagined her to be always urging. In regard to anything else she refused to be solicitous over her sister, though Tom, who actually wrote a letter once a week for the first month, did his best to disturb her. The "nabob" was not only calling oftener than ever, — and this in the absence of Stella, — but the grandfather and Esther had been invited to visit at his summer home in Hartridge, a visit which they had made, and, according to reports on their return, enjoyed immensely.

"You can pay your money and take your choice, of course," Tom wrote derisively at the end of this interesting news, which he sent in advance of Esther her-

self, "but it's ancestors *or* Esther, you can count on that. Maybe the young men out your way care more about their great-great-grandfathers than they do about girls, but in this part of the country it would be safer to bet on the girl."

Kate sniffed at this, and responded promptly that the young men in her part of the country, so far as she was acquainted with them, didn't trouble themselves about their great-great-grandfathers at all; and the mental workings of one who gave his time to the business — as Mr. Hadley certainly did in the earlier part of the summer — were beyond her. To which she added — what was clearly another matter — that even if Mr. Hadley had taken a fancy to Esther, it was by no means certain that she had a fancy for him.

She waited with some impatience for Esther's account of the visit, and the letter which came shortly certainly bore out Tom's impression that she had enjoyed it. It seemed that Mr. Hadley's father was extremely anxious to meet Deacon Saxon, but being somewhat infirm of health and indisposed for so long a ride, had urgently begged the old gentleman to come to him, — with his granddaughter, of course, — and the two had taken the drive to Hartridge one day with all the pleasure in life. The Hadleys' summer

home, Esther wrote, was perfectly beautiful, much more so in outward aspect than the Boston house, with its straight brown front, and inside it was apparently a bower of loveliness. Such simple but elegant furnishings, such devices for making summer leisure redolent of rest and culture! Ah! It was a theme to inspire her pen, and she grew fairly eloquent over it.

It appeared, too, that Mr. Hadley had been more charming than ever, and his family were delightful. There had been a married sister from Boston there on a visit who had been more than gracious to Esther, and had assured her that she should count on seeing much of her during the winter. Altogether, it seemed to have been an idyllic day. Kate read the letter aloud to the family, then laid it down without joining in the general comment. She was half vexed that her sister should have had so good a time, and she really wished that Mr. Philip Hadley were not quite so agreeable.

But there were certain other people whose agreeable qualities she did not find so exasperating. The sight of one of them, coming to the house that afternoon in the edge of twilight, sent her flying out to meet him with a cry of delight.

"Mort Elwell!" she exclaimed, almost running into his arms; "oh, but I'm glad to see you!"

"Well, you'd better believe I'm glad to see you," he replied. And then they clasped hands and beamed at each other for a minute like brother and sister.

"My! how tall you're getting! Has Esther been growing like that this summer?" he demanded, as they walked together to the house.

"The first question, of course," she replied, trying to pout. "I'm sure I can't tell. I don't believe there's any difference in me, only you've forgotten how I looked when I went away."

Forgotten! Not he. He protested that he remembered just how high she had come above his shoulders when she stood on the threshing machine that day last summer. And then they both laughed. How long ago it seemed, that harvesting at the farm!

"But it seems longer to us than to you, Mort, I know it does," said the girl. "So much has happened to us, and we've seen so many different places."

"I've seen a few places myself, if you please," he retorted, "and there's more difference in them than you'd think, especially when it comes to the eating. But there are other things, besides going around, to make time seem long to a body."

They welcomed him in the house with such affectionate cordiality as might have been extended to one very dear and near of kin. Mrs. Northmore's eyes grew

bright and moist at the sight of him; and the doctor, who had stretched himself on the lounge five minutes before in a state of exhaustion, declaring that nothing short of a case of apoplexy could make him budge off it that evening, fairly bounded across the room at the sight of Morton, and shook his hand with a heartiness suggestive of exuberant vitality.

"When did you get home?" was the first question when the greetings were over, and "When are you going away?" followed, without waiting for answer.

"I just got in on the train this noon," said Morton, "and I'm going to-morrow morning. Can't spend any time loafing, you know, for the term began a month ago, and I must get there now as soon as I can."

"And you'll have back work to make up the very first thing," said Mrs. Northmore. "It's too bad to work so hard all summer and then start into your studies at such a disadvantage."

"I think I can manage that all right," said the young man, confidently. "I've got money enough to make the ends meet for a while, without doing any outside work, and it won't take me long to catch up."

"Well, don't make too brilliant a run, Mort," said the doctor, dryly. "I hate to see a good proverb spoiled; and all work and no play ought to make Jack a dull boy, if it doesn't."

"I rather think Jack's a dull boy to start with, if it knocks him out in one season," said the young man, laughing.

He was so modest, so manly, and his buoyant energy was so refreshing, that it was no wonder they all sat looking at him as if they had a personal pride in his doings.

"But at least you won't have to teach school this winter," said Mrs. Northmore.

"Not unless somebody relieves me of what I've earned this summer," said Morton, lightly. "In that case I'll speak for my old place again."

"I'll warrant they'd let you have it," said the doctor.

"Oh, they've made me the offer, already," said Morton; "besides, I hold a first-grade certificate to teach in that county, and I might miss it on examination somewhere else."

"Not much danger of that, I fancy," said Mrs. Northmore, and the doctor added, growling, "Those examinations are a good deal of a humbug. For my part, I think a few oral questions put to a fellow straight out would be worth as much as all that written stuff." He had been a county examiner once himself, and had a painful remembrance of the "stuff," which, to tell the truth, his wife had mostly examined for him.

"I rather think an oral question that was put to me helped me in my examination," said Morton, a gleam of amused remembrance coming into his eyes. "Did I ever tell you about that? I had just finished one set of papers and gone up to the desk for another, when one of the examiners, a dry, shrewd-looking old fellow, leaned over and put this question to me: 'When turkeys are six and three-fourths dollars per dozen, how many may be had for two dollars eighty-one cents and one-fourth?'"

"The mean thing!" ejaculated Kate. "He didn't expect you to figure that out in your head, right then and there, did he?"

"He expected an answer," said Morton, "and do you know, as good luck would have it, I hit it at the first shot, and gave it to him in a quarter of a minute. I told him *five*, and that was right."

"Well," gasped the doctor, "talk about lightning calculators!"

"But I didn't calculate it," laughed the young man. "I told you 'twas luck. You see I knew the answer, being turkeys, must be a whole number, and the sum named was less than half the price of a dozen, so it couldn't be six, and I took the chances on five. The man that asked the question saw through it, of course, and I believe he sort of liked me after that.

But look here, who cares about county examinations or what I did last winter? I want to hear about this summer, and how you liked New England. Start in, Kate, and tell me everything."

"'Only that and nothing more?'" she said, lifting her hands. "Why, I intend to give out my experiences sparingly, and embellish my conversation with them for the rest of my life. But we did have a glorious time — I'll tell you so much. And New England's great. If you've any doubts on that point you may as well give them up right here and now. It's funny, some of it, of course; the little fields, and the stone walls, and the ox-teams — but you get used to those things, you know; and the people are nice. It's the next best thing to living out here — it really is — to live in the Old Bay State, as grandfather calls it."

And then, with an abandon which hardly tallied with her avowed intention to keep some capital for future use, she threw herself into the doings on the old farm, the attractions of New England villages, and the delights — oh! the delights of Boston and the sea, with his eager questions drawing her on and fresh items suggesting themselves at every turn.

It lengthened itself into a long delicious evening, and after a little the young people had it all to themselves, for the doctor was called off, and not to a

case of apoplexy either, only to a child who had put a button into his ear; and a neighbor dropped in, to whose troubles Mrs. Northmore must give her sympathizing attention.

There was one subject on which the young man's interest showed itself keen at a score of points in the course of Kate's vivacious talk. Did Esther look at this and that as her sister did? Did she note the contrasts with a touch of pride and pleasure in the ways at home? Was she wholly glad to stay behind? And might it not be longer than the winter, much longer perhaps, before she would be at home again.

As to the last point Kate eagerly denied the danger. The other questions she answered more slowly, but with her usual frankness. Esther had been more in love with New England than herself; she had not criticised things — oh, dear, she had never quarrelled with anybody in behalf of her native state; and she had been perfectly delighted with the invitation to stay, there could be no doubt of that. And then she was silent, her face lengthening a little, as she thought of the one who gave the invitation.

The young man had listened with the closest attention while she talked, and he gave a little sigh when she finished. "I'm afraid I shan't know as much about things that are happening there now as I did

before you came away," he said wistfully. "You were ever so good about writing to me, Kate. I haven't had but one letter since you came away."

His eyes wandered as he spoke to that letter with its well-known writing lying on the table, and it was not the first time since he came in that they had moved in that direction. Kate noted the hungry look, and felt mean.

"We had one to-day, and she is perfectly well," she said uneasily. And then she would have changed the subject but that Virgie, who was so little given to conversation that her occasional contributions were the more dangerous, spoke up just then and said it was such an interesting letter, all about a visit Esther had made with grandfather; Kate had read it to them all, and it was beautiful.

"Can't I hear it too?" said Morton, boldly.

There was no help for it now, and Kate walked soberly to the table. There were one or two passages she would certainly have left out, but Virgie, who had read it three times, would be likely enough to call attention to the omissions, and that would make the business worse. So she went straight through it, with a certain hardness of tone when allusions were made to the charming qualities of Mr. Philip Hadley which made them all the more emphatic.

Morton Elwell's eyes did not move from her face as she read. Indeed, there was a tenseness about his expression at moments which suggested that he was holding his breath.

"So you see grandfather's taking her into all the gayeties," Kate said rather nervously, as she laid down the letter. "She's a wonderful favorite with grandfather."

Morton drew his hand across his forehead. "This Mr. Hadley is the one who went to the graveyard with her, isn't he? Esther wrote me about that."

"Yes, only 'twas Stella he was with," said Kate. "Esther was with grandfather."

The exact arrangement of the party was apparently not the main interest just then for Morton. "And he showed you around Boston and Cambridge and those other places afterward, didn't he?" he queried.

"Yes, we did a good deal of sight-seeing together," said Kate, and then she added hurriedly, "he and Stella are tremendously up in art, and that's why he went to some places with us. He wanted to show her a picture in his own house for one thing. Maybe Esther wrote you about that too."

"But he knows Stella's gone from your grandfather's now, doesn't he?" said the young man. There were apparently other things besides the price of turkeys

in regard to which he could draw quick deductions, and his eyes searched Kate's at that moment with a look that was straight and keen.

"I don't know but he does," she said almost pettishly.

There was a minute's silence, and somehow it occurred to Morton Elwell just then that the hour was growing late.

"I must be going home," he said. "Aunt Jenny 'll wonder what has become of me."

He said good night to Virgie, and stopped in the hall a minute for a word with Mrs. Northmore. Kate was beside him. "I'll go down to the gate with you," she said, as she had said many a time before, and he seemed to expect it.

But when they were fairly beyond the porch, in the shadows of the shrubbery, he slipped his arm through hers, and said very quietly: "Kate, I wish you'd tell me the truth about this Mr. Hadley. He's coming to see Esther, of course. Is he in love with her?"

"I don't know that he is. I never saw a thing to make me think so," said Kate, with low vehemence. And then (for there was a frankness in her which would not let her stop there) she added: "Tom says he is; but Tom made up his mind to that right at the

start, and he's the most obstinate boy I ever saw about his own opinions. He never changes his mind, no matter what good reasons you may show him on the other side."

The idiosyncrasies of Tom Saxon were not interesting just then to Morton Elwell. Kate heard him draw his breath hard before he said: "Of course he's in love with her. He's been seeing her all summer, and he couldn't help being. And she"— he paused for an instant before he added bitterly: "I understand it now. It's knowing *him* that made her so willing to stay."

"Oh, no it isn't, Mort; indeed it isn't," said Kate, bringing him to a standstill with a compelling pressure on his arm. "If you knew everything, you wouldn't say that. It was Aunt Katharine that made her stay. Oh, if you knew Aunt Katharine! She's a dreadfully strong-minded woman, and she's taken a terrible fancy to Esther. She'd like to make her feel just as she does about woman's rights, and never marrying, and all that sort of thing. *She's* the one, not Mr. Hadley at all, that has such an influence over Esther."

"Nonsense!" said Morton Elwell; and he said it with a sharpness that for an instant made Kate almost afraid of him.

There was silence for a minute as they moved down the path. Then, with the sharpness gone out of his voice and the bitterness overflowing it again, he said: "I don't wonder at it. He's rich and agreeable, — you wrote that yourself, Kate. He's all that's delightful and cultivated, — she says so in the letter. He has everything and — and time to be with her," he added, with a groan. "She can't help caring for him. I know it as if I were there to see."

They had reached the great horse-chestnut tree by the gate, and the moonlight came down through the half-leafless branches on the girl's face lifted to his. "Oh, it won't be the way you think, Mort," she whispered passionately. "Esther *can't* care for Mr. Hadley. I'm sure, I'm sure she can't!"

"Why can't she?" he asked, and his face looked pale and stern.

She caught her breath with a sob. "Because — oh, Mort — because *you're* so much nicer!" she said, with an utter abandon. And then her head dropped, and a splash of tears fell on his coat-sleeve.

He stooped suddenly and kissed her; then, without even a good night, strode off down the road.

It lay before him straight and empty in the moonlight; and he followed it past the turn that led to his uncle's house, on and on, taking no note of dis-

tance. This fear which had come to him so suddenly — it seemed already not a possibility but a certainty, and it stalked at his side, keeping even step with his. He had no vanity to whisper that there were other attractions besides those which fortune had bestowed so lavishly on Mr. Philip Hadley. He had been too busy all his life, and such gifts as he had were too inherently part of his nature for him to turn an observant eye upon them and mark their value. He seemed to himself a homely, humdrum fellow beside this other who had stepped so lightly into Esther Northmore's life. There was envy enough in his heart, Heaven knew; but it somehow withheld the thought that wealth was accidental, culture acquired, — poor things at best beside that inner something which makes the man. They were good gifts. He hoped to prove it for himself by and by, and that other something — How if Mr. Philip Hadley were rich in that, too?

But was it fair, was it fair that he, to whom only a summer pleasuring had brought acquaintance with Esther Northmore, should steal her away from one who had loved her so long? His heart ran swiftly over the past, and a lump rose in his throat as memory brought back those early days. She was five years old, he seven, when he came to his

uncle's house, a lonesome, homesick boy. He remembered how she came across the fields with her mother, on that first afternoon, in her little red shoes and white apron, a dainty figure, with gentle ways and soft, loving eyes. He remembered how she had slid her hand into his and whispered she was sorry his mother was dead. And then they had played together, he drawing her about in his little cart; and before he knew it the long day was ending and a sense of being at home had stolen into his heart. That was the beginning, and what friends they had been through the childish years that followed! He remembered how he bought her a carnelian ring once at the county fair. The ring had broken next day, and she had wept scalding tears. Alas, there was no dime left to buy another, but he had promised that she should have a gold one sometime, with a shining stone at the top, and she had been comforted with this, and promised to wait.

Ah, one could not bear such memories as this. He thrust it down and swallowed fiercely at the lump in his throat, which seemed his heart itself swollen to bursting. But other pictures came: the growing girl, so willing to take his help, so quick to give her own, so proud of all his successes. They had gone through the district school side by side, he only a class ahead,

though older, for his chance to begin had come later than hers. How many times he had worked her problems for her, how often he had gone over his boyish debates and speeches with her for listener, on the way to school, or in her father's orchard when his chores were done, sure that he had made his pleading well when the tears sprang into her eyes, and the quick responsive color flushed and paled in her cheeks! What would any work he could do, or any triumph he could ever win, be worth to him if she had ceased to care?

There had been a difference in her, — he had marked it uneasily, slow as he was in the steadfast loyalty of his own thoughts to guess at change in hers, — but he had said to himself it was because they had been apart too much, she at boarding school, he at college. It would all be as it had been when they could see each other again in the old way. That they belonged to each other was a thing he had held so simply and of course that the fear of losing her had never till now really entered his heart.

And then, with a passionate protest, he felt himself writing to her, telling her of his love and calling her back; but swift chilling doubts overtook the impulse. If she had forgotten, slipped away from all this of the past, could any word of his, across the cruel

distance, call her back? He had no art with his pen, and what would the poor meagre page be worth beside the living presence of this new, delightful friend?

The bitterness gathered like a flood in his heart, and all its waves and billows went over him. He knew nothing of the beauty of the night nor the way he was taking. He had no sense of outward things, when his name was called suddenly behind him.

"Mort Elwell! Well, upon my word! I thought 'twas you, and then I thought it couldn't be. When did I ever catch up with you before, on a straight road, with you well in the start?"

The young man turned at the voice, and for a moment stared blankly at the speaker. It was the New Light preacher, his friend of many years, his comrade in the labors of the early summer. The long loose figure bent eagerly toward him, and the sallow face shone in the flooding moonlight. It was impossible, at any pass of melancholy, not to find a moment's pleasure in so warm a greeting.

"I declare I didn't hear you coming up," said the young man. "I was taking my time to it, and wasn't looking for company."

"No, I reckon not," said the preacher, smiling. "It's toler'ble late, if you happen to know it, and you're a little out of your own bailiwick, aren't you?"

"Over in yours?" said Morton, noting for the first time how far he had gone. "Well, it's rather late for you too, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the preacher; "but I've been over at old man Towner's. He's having one of his bad spells, and this time he won't pull through. I reckon he'll be done with living here in a few days more."

"Well, it's something to be through with," said the young man. He had spoken more to fill the pause than for anything else, but there was a dreary note in his voice which fell strangely on the ear of the other.

"You, Mort!" he exclaimed, and his eyes searched the face of his companion for a moment curiously. It looked tired and worn. "Just through your work?" he asked. "When did you get in?"

"Finished my job yesterday," said Morton, "and am here just long enough to pick up my things. Shall go to-morrow morning."

"And start in for another stiff year's work," said the preacher. "Well, Mort, you've made a summer of it. I hope things 'll ease up for you sometime, and they will, they will."

The young man lifted his head with an impatient movement. "I wish people wouldn't pity me for having to work," he said. "I don't care how hard I work. It's the easiest thing there is."

Some fine wrinkles had gathered in the preacher's forehead. "Yes," he said, with his eyes still on Morton's face. "It's a good deal easier than wanting work and not getting it, for instance. Plenty of folks could tell you that."

There was a touch of contempt mingled now with the impatience in Morton's voice. "I never was a bit afraid but I could get all the work I wanted," he said. "Give me my head and hands, and I'll take care of that."

"And not be so proud of yourself for doing it maybe, when you get to my age," said the preacher. Then dropping into his bit of a drawl, he added: "But there *are* things that ain't so easy to come by, eh, Mort? It's a fact, man. But 'Faint-heart never won fair lady,' nor anything else worth having."

A flush rose in Morton's face and he sent a quick look at the preacher. The shrewd gray eyes were looking at him kindly.

"And Stout-heart doesn't win them either, sometimes," he said bitterly.

"Oh, it's chance, it's chance, the way things happen!"

The preacher laid his hand on the young fellow's shoulder. "No, Mort," he said with a peculiar gentleness in his voice, "Stout-heart *doesn't* win them always. We fail of them sometimes with all our trying. God knows how I've wanted some things

I've missed. But there's one thing we needn't miss, — the Lord himself stands to that, — courage to meet what comes, strength to go without, if we must, and not be broken by it."

The young man stopped in his walk and faced the other. "Strength!" he cried, almost fiercely. "To do without the things that make everything else worth having! Where is one to get it? You could hunt for work — I'd take my chances on finding that — but *this!*"

He set his teeth hard, and the preacher felt the strong young figure grow tense under his hand. He drew himself up, and his eyes held the boy's with a compelling earnestness.

"Where are you to get it, Mort?" he said solemnly. "From the One that gave you what strength you've got. Do you think He bankrupted Himself giving you and me the little sense, the little power that's in us? I tell you there's more; there's *enough* for every soul of us. Cry to Him for it. Open your eyes and open your heart. It's here, it's there, it's all around us. And it's ours for the having."

He stretched out his arms as he spoke with a wide reverent gesture, and his plain awkward face looked noble as he lifted it toward the sky.

They stood together for a long still minute with-

out speaking. He had broken in upon an hour of solitary wrestling; the older man knew it, and he shrank back now from his intrusion. Suddenly he turned away. "It's a little shorter for me across the fields, Mort, and I'll leave you here," he said. "Good night, and God bless you."

It was past midnight when Morton Elwell opened the door of his uncle's house. A light was burning in the sitting room, and his aunt rose as he entered, dropping from her lap the work with which she had been filling the time while she waited.

"What, were you sitting up for me, Aunt Jenny?" he said, as she met him.

"It's a long time since I had a chance to sit up for you, Mort," she said tenderly. And then she added, with a gentle reproach in her voice, "Don't you think you ought to be taking a little more rest to-night, when you start so early to-morrow?"

"I'm going to bed right now," he said. Then he put his arm around her neck in the old affectionate way, as he added, "A fellow has a deal to be thankful for that's had such an auntie as you are to take care of him all these years."

And with that manly word, and a little quiver at his lips, he mounted the stairs to his own room.

CHAPTER XV.

ESTHER GOES TO PRAYER-MEETING.

MEANWHILE autumn was gliding away at the old farm. It was worth Esther Northmore's while, as Aunt Katharine had suggested, to have seen October in her mother's country. Even Old Timers, used to the glory that wrapped its hills in the shortening days, doubted gravely whether they had ever known a fall when the woods wore such gorgeous coloring as now, or kept their royal robes so long. All the world seemed flaming in crimson and gold, with fringes of purple at the roadsides, and Esther, walking joyously in the midst, felt her pulses beating to a rhythm she had never caught before in the swinging of the round old world. Her grandfather was no poet; but he liked to see the girl come in with her face glowing and her hands full of leaves, which always seemed to her more beautiful than any she had ever found before. Sometimes he was moved to remind her that this, too, was "vanity,"

one of earth's passing shows, but she protested against this, and told him it would never pass for her. She should keep it as long as she had life and memory.

Very often in these shining days came Mr. Philip Hadley; once to urge that pleasant invitation, then to make sure that his friends had returned from the trip in safety; once to bring her a book she had wanted, and at last to say good-by to Ruel Saxon. The Hadleys were about to leave their summer home. With the approach of November it was time to be back in the city. There had been an eager look in his eyes as he added, turning to Esther, "You will be going about the same time." And he had kept her hand longer than usual at the door as he said, "It has been delightful to see you in this lovely old home, but we shall see each other much oftener in Boston, I hope. I can't tell you how glad I am that you are going to be there."

She had dropped her eyes, that easy color rising in her face as he spoke, and then he had said, "Good-by for a little while," with a very earnest pressure of the hand in his, and ridden away.

It was late when he left, but she slipped out of the house immediately for a walk, and for once there were no leaves in her hand when she came back.

"'IT HAS BEEN DELIGHTFUL TO SEE YOU IN THIS LOVELY OLD HOME.'"

"It looked like rain," she said, when Tom remarked that she had stopped short of her favorite woods.

It did not look so much like rain but that Ruel Saxon went as usual to the prayer-meeting that night, and of course Esther went with him. It was one of the standing engagements for every week. Perhaps the girl could have spared it sometimes — there were few young people there — but she never declined to accompany her grandfather. As for him, it was a place he loved; a spot in which his own gifts shone conspicuous, and in which it must be confessed he sometimes appropriated more than his fair share of the time. Why Christian people did not all and always go to prayer-meeting was one of the things he could not understand, and it really seemed to him a surprising omission that there was not an explicit command in the Bible laying the duty upon them. However, he consoled himself with the admonition "not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is," to which favorite quotation he frequently added that he should not forsake the assembling of *himself* together as long as he was able to be there.

There really was some doubt in Aunt Elsie's mind to-night as to the last point. The old gentleman seemed to have all the premonitory symptoms of a

cold, but he would have scorned to stay at home for a trifle of that sort, and started in good time on the long ride to the village. He bore his part in the meeting with unusual unction, and a number of the brothers and sisters took his hand at the close to thank him impressively for his beautiful remarks. It was a form of flattery which he dearly loved.

Then, as he jogged home behind Dobbin with Esther, he fell to talking, in reminiscent mood, of his own long services in the church, and this, making all due allowance for that cheerful vanity, which he had never been at pains to conceal, was a subject on which Ruel Saxon, if any man, had some right to grow eloquent. Ministers might come and ministers might go, but, as deacon of the church in Esterly, he had gone on, if not forever, at least so long that few could remember when he had not held and magnified the office. He had sat on councils to receive and dismiss, he had contended for the faith, he had poured oil on troubled waters; in short, in all the offices of peace and war, he had stood at his post, and none could name the day when he had shirked its duties.

"I've seen some strange doings in my time," he said, after one of his pauses, "and I tell you there's as much human nature among church members as there

is among outsiders. Sometimes I've thought 'twas because they needed grace worse than most folks that the Lord elected some of 'em. I've been called on to settle quarrels among professors that would astonish you; and I've had a hand in their love affairs too, once or twice, when they got things so tangled up that they couldn't straighten 'em out for themselves," he added with a little chuckle.

"Love affairs!" repeated Esther, catching at the chance of a story. "Why, how was that? Do tell me one of them, grandfather."

He clucked to Dobbin, drew his hand across his face in the meditative way that suggested a stroking of memory, and began slowly: —

"I guess the queerest one I ever had anything to do with, and the one that bothered me most in my own mind, was that affair between Jotham Radley and those two girls. You see they were both bound to have him; and for the life of him he couldn't seem to settle on which one it should be."

"*They* were bound to have *him?*" ejaculated Esther. She had heard of two lovers to one lady, but this sort of a case was new in her acquaintance.

"Well, I don't know as I or' to say *they* were," said the old gentleman, correcting himself. "It was Huldy's mother on one side, and 'twas Polly herself on the

other. You see, Jotham had been keeping company a good while with Huldy, and folks gener'ly thought 'twas a match between them, but he got to carrying on with Polly Green 'bout the time he was building her father's barn. I always thought she must have led him on. He was a wonderful easy man to be pulled round by women folks, and Polly was a smart girl, there's no denying that.

"Well, it began to be common talk that they were engaged, and then Huldy's folks spoke out and said 'twas no such thing; it was all settled between him and Huldy long ago, and her mother showed the linen she'd spun and the bed quilts she'd pieced for housekeeping. It got to be a good deal of a scandal, for Jotham was clerk of the church, and some folks, specially the women, thought it or' to be stopped. So we deacons talked it over together, and then two of us went to see Jotham and asked him how it was about it. He didn't say much, one way or t'other — acted sort o' queer 'n' shame-faced; but he agreed the talk or' to be stopped, and said he'd have it settled in a week.

"I guess he found it harder to settle than he counted on, for Polly was a dreadful spirited girl, and Huldy's mother was the kind that couldn't be put off. Anyhow, instead of easing up, the talk kept getting louder, and Jotham didn't show his face in the meeting-house for

two Sundays. Well, the deacons felt that he was trifling with 'em, and that time we went in a body to deal with him.

"Deacon Simms did the bulk of the talking, and he told Jotham pretty straight what he thought about a man's whiffling round between two girls as he did, and then he told him if he couldn't settle the business for himself the church would have to settle it for him. At that Jotham spoke out like a man distracted, and said he wished to goodness we would. I asked him if he'd abide by our decision, and he said he'd abide by anything the girls would.

"I must say I didn't much like the business, but we went the next day to see the girls. Polly cried, and took on, and according to her account Jotham had certainly said some wonderful pointed things for a man that didn't know his own mind. As for Huldy, she looked sick and scared, and 'twas much as we could do to get a word out of her. Her mother was ready enough to talk, but Jotham warn't engaged to *her* anyhow, and I stood to it that we couldn't settle the thing by the way *she* looked at it. I always suspicioned that if Huldy'd spoke up and freed her mind, she might have made out the best case, but she wouldn't do it.

"Seemed as if she didn't want to commit him, and

the other deacons thought 'twas a clear case he ought to marry Polly. It sort of 'peared to me that it or' to be Huldy, but of course I couldn't prove it, and anyway 'twas three to one. So I gave in to the rest, and to settle all the talk, we had Jotham and Polly published in church the next Sunday. They did say Jotham turned dreadful white when they told him how we'd settled it, but he married Polly at the set time, and as far as I know they always got along well together."

"What become of Huldah?" queried Esther.

"Huldy?" said the deacon, reflecting. "Well, she stayed single till she must have been upward of thirty; then she married a widower, and everybody said 'twas a good match."

There was silence for some time, then Esther said, with her eyes on the sky, over which the clouds were shifting uneasily, "Grandfather, do you think a person *could* have any doubt in his own mind as to which one of two people he cared for most, if — if he was really in love with either of them?"

"I ain't sure but he might," said the deacon, slowly. "It takes a good while to get acquainted with folks, and I don't know but it's about as hard sometimes to know your own mind, as 'tis to know anybody else's — even if 'tis inside of you." And then he

added briskly, "But it stan's to reason that a man or' to have a care how far he goes before he gets things cleared up."

She seemed not to hear the last remark. "But if you had known a person for a long, long time," she said insistently, "there couldn't be any doubt then, could there?"

Again, like the wise man he was, the deacon answered slowly, "Well, a body or' to get his mind made up in a reasonable length of time," he said. "There was Nathan Weyler went to see Patty Foster every Saturday night for thirty years before he asked her to marry him. I should call that *slow!* But there *is* such a thing as seeing so much of folks — being so close to 'em, you know — that you don't really get as good a sight at 'em as you would if they were farther off. It's getting your attention drawn somewhere else, and seeing what's in other folks sometimes, that wakes you up to what there is in those you thought you knew best."

Esther, whose eyes had been fixed on her grandfather's face intently during this reply, looked suddenly back at the sky. She had thought there were no stars to-night, but she was aware, all at once, that there were four or five shining straight before her. Had they all come out in the last moment, or was it an illustration of what he had just been saying?

Her voice shook a little, and she did not look at her grandfather as she asked her next question. "But if it came to you that there *was* more in somebody than you had realized — if you saw more to admire than you ever did before — *that* wouldn't be enough, would it? I mean, it wouldn't be right to marry for anything but love, would it?" She broke suddenly off, then began again with a nervous, half-incoherent swiftness. "That man, for instance, that you were telling me about, and Huldah. If he had just felt sorry for her, and it kept coming to him all the time that he hated to leave her, because — because he had known her so long, and he knew it would be hard for her, and she was so good and true — all that wouldn't be enough to make him marry her, would it?"

Strange that she should be so deeply stirred over that old story of so long ago! Her hands trembled so much that she had to press them together to hold them still when she had finished.

He was a keen-witted man, Ruel Saxon. Perhaps it may have crossed his mind at that moment that he was being called once more, at this late hour of his life, to lend a hand in straightening out some tangled skein of love, but if so he did not reveal it.

"No," he said distinctly, "no; there's nothing else but love will do. It's all that's strong enough to last,

and it's a long, long thing, giving your promise to marry."

And then that shrewd reflective note crept into his voice again as he added: "But if it kept coming to a body the way you speak of, to be thinking of somebody else all the time, and be sorry for them, and all that, I should be a little mite doubtful if there wasn't something after all besides pity at the bottom of it. A body wouldn't keep on so very long being sorry for one person, if he was right down in love with another. He'd forget about that one before he knew it. It's like Aaron's rod, you see. Some things get swallowed up terrible quick when the one that's bigger and more alive stretches itself out among 'em."

She did not ask any more questions. She kept her eyes on the stars for a long time after that. And her grandfather spoke to Dobbin presently in a tone of impatience. "Get up; get up; it's time we were home long ago."

It was certainly later than usual when they drew up at the door. Aunt Elsie opened it, looking out rather anxiously when the wheels of the carriage stopped. "I guess we've been a little longer than common on the way, we've had so much to talk about," said the old gentleman, cheerfully. Then, as he got down from the carriage, and left it in the hands of Tom, who stood

ready with the lantern, he added, stretching himself, "I declare, I feel sort o' chilly and stiff in the joints. Mebbe I'd better have a little sup of something warm before I get into bed."

Esther had thought that would be the last time of going to prayer-meeting with her grandfather, and so it proved, but not because she had taken her flight before the next Wednesday evening came. Perhaps it was a cold settling upon him with the raw gray weather which November ushered in, but he was feverish next morning, and kept the house, complaining of draughts which no one else felt, and a little querulous, as he was apt to be when anything ailed that outer man in whose general soundness he took such pride.

For three days he sat by the fire, swallowing boneset tea in quantities and of a degree of bitterness which filled the household, especially Esther, with admiration; but he sternly rejected Aunt Elsie's suggestion that he should send for a physician, being in practice disposed to the opinion that a man had no use for a doctor until he had reached the point where the chances were against a doctor or any one else being able to help him. He was in something of a strait, however, when Sunday came and he was clearly unable to attend church. To admit the gravity of his case by sending for a medical

man was one thing, but to absent himself from the house of God, unless such state of gravity existed, was another; and between the two horns of the dilemma he tossed painfully all the morning. In the end Aunt Elsie settled it, and she was quite willing that he should take what grumbling comfort he could in representing himself as a martyr to feminine insistence when the doctor appeared.

Evidently the latter did not think he had been called too soon. He sent his patient promptly to bed, and now, having advertised himself as sick, the old gentleman obeyed orders with the meekness of a lamb. It would be only a few days, of course; but while it lasted he meant to make the most of his case, and take his full dues in the way of sympathy and attention.

That the minister would come promptly was certain, and there would be opportunity for testing the fidelity of his brother deacons to the duty of visiting the sick and afflicted. Undoubtedly there would be prayers sent up in his behalf from the pulpit and at the Wednesday evening prayer-meeting, and — let us not judge the good man too severely! his own gift in prayer was of no common order — he really hoped the petitions would be well expressed. As for his own family, it went without saying that they would wait upon him with unfailing attention,

while he lay, as he plaintively expressed it, on his "bed of pain and languishment"; and feminine attentions were dear to the soul of Ruel Saxon.

He did not have to suggest to Esther that she should delay her departure for Boston. Indeed, it is possible that he forgot her plans altogether, and she remembered them herself only to say quietly to Aunt Elsie, "I shall stay, of course, till he is better. I couldn't think of leaving him now, and perhaps I can be some help to you in taking care of him."

Aunt Elsie was not an effusive woman, but the tone in which she said, "It'll be a real comfort to have you here," made the girl look happy. She meant to slip across the fields later in the day and tell Aunt Katharine that her going had been postponed, but her grandfather grew restless as the day wore on, and seemed to feel neglected if some one were not constantly at his side.

"I really think Aunt Katharine ought to know it," she said at supper, and Tom, who was sitting at the table, responded promptly, "I'll go and tell her, if you want me to."

"Will you?" she said eagerly. "Thank you, Tom. Tell her I'll come down and see her myself as soon as grandfather gets a little better."

"And don't let her feel too much worried about

him," cautioned his mother. "He isn't any worse than he was last week, only he's in bed, and that makes him seem worse."

"All right," said Tom, "I'll go as soon as I'm through milking."

Esther thanked him again, though in her heart she would rather he had proposed to spend an hour in his grandfather's room. It was several days since she had seen Aunt Katharine, and she would have liked a little chat in the pleasant living-room, where that big wood stove had been set up, and the windows were growing gay with old-fashioned chrysanthemums. They were the only flowers she ever kept in her windows, and she excused her partiality for these on a whimsical plea of pity.

"They count on being taken in," she said one day, when Esther came upon her in the garden potting them for the winter. "They know they can't do half their blossoming outdoors at this time o' year, but that's the way they time it every season. Look at those buds, thick as spatter, and they won't half of 'em have a chance to show their color unless somebody goes to the trouble of taking 'em in and doing for 'em. I hate to see things go so far and then make a fizzle of it." And she had pressed the earth about their roots in the big stone jars with

a carefulness of touch and a look of exasperated patience which the girl had enjoyed immensely.

The friendship which to others seemed so odd seemed to her now the most natural thing in the world, and more and more she valued it. Once, in the soreness of that clash with Kate, she had poured out her heart to her mother. Perhaps Kate had done so too in the days that followed her return; but the reply which Mrs. Northmore made had cleared the atmosphere for Esther, at least, and left the intimacy free and untroubled.

"My dear child," she wrote, "I am sure you will not believe that I share your sister's uneasiness over your friendship with Aunt Katharine. The questions over which she has brooded so long are real and vital, and I am not sorry that you should come to know them through knowing one who holds her views upon them with such deep and unselfish earnestness as your Aunt Katharine. A braver or truer heart than hers I have never known. But it must have occurred to you — if not, it surely will later — that she sees only one side of some of the great facts of our woman's life. The reformer who sees only one side of any question is needed, no doubt, to startle others into recognition of facts they would otherwise miss, but in the end the reform must depend on those who see both sides, and see them with steady

fairness. If your life shall be as happy as I hope it may be, I cannot think you will permanently hold some of Aunt Katharine's opinions; but meanwhile I would not have you shut your heart to her or her word. Oh, believe me, my dear, there is no eye-opener in the world like love."

The old woman was drawing the shades behind the chrysanthemums in the windows when Tom came to her house in the dusk of that evening. He had expected to deliver his message at the door, but she insisted on his coming in and rendering it with careful detail. Certainly he did not err on the side against which his mother had cautioned him. Indeed, if the old gentleman had heard his grandson's statement of his case he would probably have felt a strong inclination to get out of bed and go to his sister's at once for the express purpose of telling her that he was much worse than the boy had represented.

Tom was not inclined to anxieties, and a certain inquisitorial attitude which his grandfather had maintained during the past few days as to his own work at the barn, and the amount of care which Dobbin was receiving, had left the impression on his mind that his grandfather was not suffering as much as he might be.

He revealed this to some extent as he answered

Aunt Katharine's questions, and she, after putting them sharply for a few minutes, settled back in her chair with an air of evident relief. She was not surprised to learn that Esther had put off her going to Boston. "I should know she'd do it," she said, nodding, and she added, with a peculiar smile, "I s'pose your grandfather hated dreadful bad to disappoint her."

Tom disclaimed any knowledge on this head, and then remarked acutely, "He'll keep her busy enough while she stays. He doesn't seem to want her out of his sight a minute."

"Hm," said Miss Saxon. "I'll warrant he'd keep 'em all busy if they were there." And then she remarked casually, "It must seem sort of quiet at your house compared with what 'twas this summer."

"Kate was the liveliest one," said Tom, and he said it with such a tone of regret that his aunt looked at him keenly.

"You liked her, did you?" she asked.

Perhaps his secret knowledge of that interview in which she had worsted Kate, and an impression that she had a special grudge against the girl, inclined him to the unusual emphasis with which he answered the question.

"I never saw a girl I liked so well in my life," he

said. "She's made of the right sort of stuff, and she's game clear through."

"Hm," grunted Miss Saxon again, beginning to look very much interested. "I understand you 'n' she did a sight of quarrelling. She generally got ahead of you, didn't she?"

"No marm, she didn't," said Tom, promptly. "I generally got ahead of her, only she'd never own it."

Aunt Katharine laughed. If anything could please her more than to have a girl get the best of a controversy it was to know that she had kept on after getting the worst. She had always approved the spirit of those old Britons, of whom Cæsar complained that they never knew when they were beaten.

"What do you mean by saying she's made of the right sort of stuff?" she asked suddenly.

"Why, I mean," said Tom, hesitating a little, — he was not analytical in his turn of mind, — "I mean she's plucky, and she's out-and-out about everything. I'd trust her as quick as I would a boy."

"As quick as you would a boy!" repeated Aunt Katharine, bristling; "what do you mean by that, I'd like to know."

Tom had not come for a controversy with Aunt Katharine, and she really looked a little dangerous at that moment. But he remembered suddenly that

word of Kate's, that the old woman's manner didn't "faze" her, after the first, and he determined, as far as in him lay, not to be fazed either.

"Why, I didn't mean anything bad," he said, drawing a little nearer the edge of his chair, "but there's a difference, you know. At least you would know if you were a boy. Most girls are sort of sly when they want to get anything out of you, and they do things they wouldn't think were fair for you to do. But she wasn't that way. She always let you know what she was up to, and when it came to fighting she struck right out from the shoulder. But I wasn't blaming the rest of 'em. I guess it's all right, being girls," he added, rising and beginning to move toward the door.

Aunt Katharine rose too, and brought her cane down on the floor with a sharp thud. "That's it!" she said, fiercely. "Boys 'n' men, you're all alike, and you've got the notion already. You act as if we women folks were weaker creatures than you are. You make us think we are; and then you look for all the tricks that weaker creatures use when they defend themselves. It serves you right if we *do* use 'em. But it's a lie all the same, for both of us."

She drew her lips hard, then, as she saw his hand on the knob of the door, she said, "Tell your grandfather I'll be up to see him to-morrow."

She did not keep the promise. The rain, which had been threatening for days, falling now and then in drizzling showers, then stopping again, as if, though still in sullen mood, some vacillating purpose held it, settled down at last for steady work. There was a week of leaden days, with the rain beating out all that was left of the color in the woods, and changing the world into one brown monotony which melancholy seemed to have marked for her own.

And through it all, at the old house, Ruel Saxon kept his bed, and as the days went on grew no better. There was not much pain: a little fever, a growing drowsiness, a failing appetite, a little swelling of the limbs. Even the doctor seemed not to know what it was that had crept so suddenly upon the active frame, but he looked graver with every visit. Once, as he added another vial to the little row on the stand by the bed, he mentioned a name which the sick man, opening his eyes a little wider, repeated, adding, "That was what ailed my grandfather;" and then he closed his eyes without sign of uneasiness. Perhaps he remembered how much stronger in all its seeming powers was this body of his than that worn-out form from which the spirit of the grandfather stole away at last.

But a change came over him in these days. He lost

the querulous tone of inquiry about things at the barn. He seemed to have forgotten that suspicion of his that Tom was liable to let Dobbin's manger go empty. Once he said to the boy instead, "It's a little hard on you and Mike to have it all to do, Tom. I wish I could help you with the husking."

At last there came a day when the rain ceased to fall. The sun shone out clear and bright, and the clouds went stately across the sky, to the measure of marches they had kept in October. Mists rose from the earth, not heavily, but with a lightness suggestive of warmth still in the breast of the earth, and Esther, standing on the doorstep of the old house, noted that there was even yet a little greenness among the limp stalks in the garden where a flock of birds were twittering over the seeds they had found for their breakfast. "I'm so glad the rain has gone," she said, drawing a long breath. "It's pleasant weather that grandfather needs."

And then she went softly into his room to tell him how the sun was shining, and smiled as he murmured in reply, "Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun."

It was that day in the afternoon that Aunt Katharine came across the fields. The door of the kitchen was on the latch, and she lifted it and stepped in

without knocking. Perhaps she expected to see him sitting by the fire, for she looked before her eagerly, but even Aunt Elsie was not in sight, and she passed on without greeting to her brother's room. He looked quite bright as he lay with his face toward Esther, who had just been giving him a cup of broth.

"Why, Aunt Katharine!" exclaimed the girl, rising to her feet, and the old man, lifting his head, put out his hand with an eager welcome.

"So you hain't managed to get out of bed yet?" she said, taking the chair from which Esther had risen, and looking down at her brother with an affectionate smile. "Well, I'm sorry for you, Ruel." Then, a half whimsical expression creeping over her smile, she added: "'Pears to me you don't hold up so much better 'n some of us that don't claim to be so stout. I've owned up to it for a good while that I ain't as young as I used to be, and there's no denying that I make a pretty fair showing with most old women when it comes to aches and pains, but they hain't brought me onto the flat of my back for the last ten years."

"I've been favored above most, Katharine," said the old man, mildly. "I've had my strength and faculties spared to me beyond the common, and I can't complain of anything now. 'Shall we receive good

at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?' It is the Lord's will, let him do what seemeth him good."

She was evidently struck with his reply, and for a moment looked at him keenly. "I should have come up before this, if it hadn't rained all the time," she said, "and I took it for granted you was getting along. But I guess you hain't needed me any, with those that are here to wait on you."

The old man's eyes turned to Esther with a peculiar tenderness. "No, I don't want for anything," he said. "Elsie manages everything just right, and Esther here seems to know what I need before I get a chance to speak of it. It's queer now how she puts me in mind of her mother," he went on musingly. "Sometimes I can't get it out of my mind that it's Lucia sitting right here by me. And I hain't been out of my head either, have I?"

The girl did not answer the question, but she stooped and kissed his forehead. "It's nice to have you think I'm mother," she said. "Do it all you please."

He smiled at her, then turned with a sudden wistfulness to his sister. "Katharine," he said, "I've been thinking a lot about you, and how much harder 'twould be for you than 'tis for me, if you should

be taken sick down there all by yourself. There wouldn't be anybody to take care of you as the folks take care of me. I wish you lived up here with us. I've wanted it this good while; and Elsie 'd be willing, you know she would."

"She wouldn't like it, Ruel, and you wouldn't either, after a little while," said the old woman, her swift honesty throwing a note that was a trifle harsh into her voice. "You and I never did see things the same way, and we should see 'em more contrariwise than ever, if we had to stand on just the same piece o' ground to look at 'em."

The old man lifted his head with an obvious effort, and his breath came quick for a moment. "No," he said, "we never did look at things just alike, you 'n' I, and I guess 'twas natural to us both to want to pull the other round to our way. But I've been thinking about that too, Katharine, and I'm — I'm afraid I've riled you up sometimes when I hadn't or' to. You've got just as good a right to your way of looking at things as I have to mine, and I'm afraid I've said things to you sometimes that warn't becoming."

What she might have replied to this, if a neighbor, with Aunt Elsie, had not entered the room at that moment, is not certain. A pallor had swept suddenly

across her face, and her eyes, wide and startled, were fixed with a frightened look upon her brother. She rose from her chair as the others drew near, and without responding to their greeting stepped swiftly outside the door. Then she beckoned to her niece with a trembling gesture.

"Elsie," she whispered, when the other had crossed the threshold, "I'll be obliged to you if you'll let Tom hitch up and drive me down to the house. I want to get a few things and come right back. If you don't mind I'll stay here a while. Ruel's a dreadful sick man."

CHAPTER XVI.

IN WHICH SEVERAL PEOPLE GET HOME.

SHE had guessed the truth first, but they knew it, all of them, in a few days more. They knew that Ruel Saxon's feet were set on the downward path to the valley from which there is no return.

They did not send for Stella. She had her work, and there were enough in the home to do all that could be done for him. Still there was little pain, a growing weakness, and the mind wandering more and more often, but always peacefully, and oftenest over the years that lay far, far behind him. Of Esther he seemed almost to have lost knowledge. He called her Lucia constantly now, and liked no one so much at his bedside.

And she kept her place, with no regret for any employment she might have had in its stead. There came a letter from Mr. Philip Hadley, with messages for her grandfather, and though the latter but half understood as she read them, he seemed touched and

pleased. The young man had learned, through a call on Stella, of the old gentleman's illness and the consequent delay in the carrying out of Esther's plan, and he wrote, earnestly hoping it might not be for long, with kindest expressions of sympathy for his aged friend.

And then there came another, but this Esther did not read aloud. The reading to herself alone left a troubled look in her eyes as she laid it down. It seemed that Mr. Hadley's plans had suffered change, too. His father was not bearing the Boston November well, and California for the winter was the doctor's prescription. He must go with them, the young man wrote, to see his father and mother well settled, but it would be only for a few weeks, and by the time he returned surely Esther herself would be in Boston. "I confess," he added, "that anxious as I am to do what I can for my father, I could hardly bear it to be away from Boston if you were here now."

They objected to her sitting up with her grandfather that night on the ground that she was not looking as well as usual, but Esther protested. It was her turn, she pleaded. She had had the promise of staying with him till midnight, and indeed, she was perfectly able. So they let her have her way, and left her alone with him in the dear, familiar room, with the lamp

burning low on the table, and everything ready to her hand. She could call the others in a moment if she needed them. He had been easier than usual during the day, sleeping most of the time, and again at moments seeming so like himself that, in spite of them all, she could not believe he was going away soon. Why should he? Life was sweet to him still, and his body, till now, had seemed strong and active. What was that length of years which people named with a shake of the head as they mentioned his illness? It was not years that counted in making men old. It was labor and loss and heartache. The labor was joy to one who loved it as he did, the simple labor of the fields, and of friendly service among his fellows. And of loss and heartache there could be none to sap the springs of life for one whose cheerful faith laid hold of the eternities like his. It was not time, surely it was not time yet, for the silver cord to be loosed which bound Ruel Saxon to his work and his friends.

So she said to herself with the easy hopefulness of youth, as she watched the old man lying there with his face on the pillow. He grew more restless as the hours went on. Memory, while all the other faculties lay sleeping, seemed to bestir itself with unwonted vigor. Hymns, quaint and long-forgotten in the churches, rolled one after another from his

lips, and Psalms, so many and with such unhesitating sureness, that the girl listened marvelling, and wondered if he knew them all.

Then there came a change in his voice, and his tone grew more appealing. It was not recitation now, it was exhortation. He seemed to be warning sinners, pleading with fellow-Christians. Ah, she caught the meaning. He thought he was in prayer-meeting again, and the zeal of the place had eaten him up with its old delight and fervor. She smiled, remembering that last meeting, and bent her head closer to catch the words.

A strain of tenderness crept through them now. Solemnly and very slowly he repeated, "Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation." He paused for a moment, then, in a voice that was low but strangely clear, went on, "Oh, my friends, do you mark the word? That precious stone, that head of the corner, is a *tried* stone, tried through all the years and proven sure. *Tried*" — he lingered on the word with unspeakable earnestness — "by whom? By Abraham, by Moses, and by all the prophets, men who heard the voice of God and followed where it led them; tried by Peter, by James, and John, men who saw his face in the face of his Son, and leaned

upon his breast and loved him; tried by all the host of martyrs, who laid down their lives for his sake, counting it gain for the joy that was set before them; tried by" — the voice sank almost to a whisper, and the names of old neighbors and friends fell lovingly one after another, the names of fellow-farers with him in the journey of life who had passed to their rest before him. Listening intently, the girl knew them at the last for some of her own kindred, as he murmured softly, "by Caleb Saxon, by Joel and Mary, by Rachel my wife," and then, after longer pause, with his eyes opening wide and a tremor of unutterable joy and humility in the low glad murmur, "*tried — by — me.*"

A smile flitted over his face, and the eyelids dropped. She thought he was asleep, and moved noiselessly away lest even her breathing should disturb him. It was almost an hour later, and the watch on the table told her it was time for his medicine, when she went again to his side.

"Grandfather," she said, bending over him; but he did not stir. She laid her hand on his, and the chill struck to her heart. She started back, and for a moment stood in her place, almost as white and motionless as he. Then, with a cry, she flew out of the room, calling to the others to come, the others

who, with all their haste, could never again in the old way catch word or look of his.

For he was gone. With that last word, the spirit so bright and eager — ah, yes! so impatient at moments, so prone to the hasty word, so open to the little vanities, but sound at the core, and steadfast to bear its part in sun and storm as any oak on the hills — had stolen away. It was of himself he had spoken last. They mused on it a little as she told them; but they knew it was of himself as the humble, the rich recipient of grace unspeakable, and in that great gladness had passed on to the Giver.

They bent around him weeping, the older women, but Esther was too stunned for tears. She had been alone with Death and had caught no hint of his presence. She had never guessed that he could come and go as stealthily as this. There was nothing more that she could do, and they sent her away, not letting her reproach herself that she had not known. "It was not strange," they said; and Aunt Elsie added, steadying her voice for the girl's sake, "It was better so; the kindest way it could have come."

It was a wonderful night. The first snow of the season had fallen while the old man lay dying, and now the moon shone out with a still, white glory, in which all the world lay new and clean. In the

orchard beyond her window some boughs of trees, cut by the saw of the pruner and not yet gathered from the ground, lay glistening like great branches of coral; and the old stone wall had been builded anew, touched with masonry of silver. Strange how every detail of the scene swept in upon the girl, as she stood there looking out upon it, wide-eyed and silent!

It was a picture in which her thoughts would frame themselves again and again in the years that were coming, when the solemn moods of life should bring her face to face with the things of the soul. And in that clearness and stillness, things which had puzzled her grew plain, and she knew her own heart as she had not known it before. She could not have explained how it came; but before that great reality of death, the unrealities of life slipped noiselessly away. The things which had been of the surface fell off, and the needs, the loves, that were deepest only were left. To have seen them once in that clear light was to know them for what they were, and she could not afterward forget.

They sent word to Stella in the morning, and late that night Tom brought her from the station. She had not loved her grandfather as Esther had — she had not so enjoyed his companionship; but the knowl-

edge that he was gone brought tears and genuine sorrow.

"Dear old grandfather!" she said, looking down at the still face. "How we shall miss him! It won't seem like home with him gone." And then she drew her mother away to talk over the details of the event that was coming. There must be no flowers about his coffin, only one long beautiful sheaf of wheat; and she would have no crape on the door, only a branch of evergreen from the woods he had planted, with a sprig of myrtle.

It was at the church that the last services were held. The rooms at the old house could not have contained the throng that gathered to do him honor. He had been a diligent attendant at funerals himself, and had been frankly in favor of extended remarks on the character of the deceased, even though the custom put the preacher to sore straits sometimes, when the virtues of the departed were not too many or luminous.

Indeed, he had been known to excuse the preacher under such circumstances for blinking the facts a little. At least he had called the attention of captious critics to that funeral lament of David's, in which he distinctly alluded to a very persistent persecutor of his as "lovely and pleasant," — language

which, to tell the truth, had really seemed to Ruel Saxon a little excessive, and had led him to wonder at times what the generous psalmist would have done if he had not been able to couple Saul's name with Jonathan's.

There was no lack of words at his own funeral, words spoken with impressive earnestness and warmth, and it was a tribute to the wide regard in which Ruel Saxon was held that not only the minister of his own church, but others from towns around, begged the privilege of a part in the service.

"He would have liked it if he had been there; it was a funeral after his own heart," Stella said, talking it over that evening with Esther. She drew a long soft sigh, and added, "I declare I can't realize yet that it was actually grandfather himself. He was trying sometimes, but never tiresome; and life will lose part of its spice here at home, with him gone out of it."

Esther did not reply. Somehow she could not talk about things which were close to her heart in the cool way Stella could. After a little silence the latter said: "You'll go to Boston with me, of course, when I go back. I shall stay at home long enough to get things settled for mother, and there'll be no need of either of us staying after that."

"Stella," said Esther, speaking very quietly, "I suppose you'll think it's strange, but I've decided not to go to Boston." The other started, and she went on hurriedly, "I should like to be with *you*, and I know there'd be a great deal to enjoy, but grandfather's dying has changed everything for the present, and honestly, there's nothing I want now so much as to be at home."

For a minute Stella seemed too much surprised to speak. Then she said, with a peculiar look at her cousin, "There's somebody besides me who'll be dreadfully disappointed if you don't come."

Esther returned the look without flinching, though her color rose a little. "If you mean Mr. Hadley," she said, "I should be very sorry to think he'd care much, and truly I don't think he would; at least not after the very first. I shall write to him. I must; for he sent such kind messages to grandfather, and he'd want to know how it all was at the last. I think he'll understand how I feel. I can't quite explain it, but it's home and the home people I want. There's nothing here now that I care for as I care for them."

Stella's eyes were on the floor, and she did not raise them as she said, after a long pause, "I don't quite make you out, Esther, but you are an awfully nice girl. I wish it wasn't so far between here and Indiana."

"I shall never think it's far after this," said Esther, giving her cousin's hand a little squeeze. And then she added cheerfully, "Don't you think it would be nice to give Mr. Hadley one of grandfather's old books? There are some of them, you know, that are really very curious, and he's so fond of those rare old things. I'll tell him that you've taken one for him; I believe it would please him."

She had more misgiving as to how Aunt Katharine would receive the news of her changed intention, but not from her either did she meet any entreaties. The old woman seemed strangely broken by her brother's death. It was she beyond all others who had been stricken. An apathy which was wholly new had settled upon her, and was only shaken off at moments when she talked of him.

"I thought he'd outlive me by years," she said to Esther. "I always twitted him with thinking that he was so much smarter than the rest of us; but he was, and I used to think, as he did, that he might live to see his hundred years. I don't know why he shouldn't have had 'em." And then she added, with a quaver in her voice: "I wish I'd spoke up when he said what he did the day I came in. I've riled him too, sometimes, when I needn't, but it took me so by surprise that I couldn't answer then. All I could think

of was that he was going to die." She drew a long sigh, and ended, "You must do as you think best, child, about going home. I don't blame you any for changing your plans."

She went back to her own house the day after the funeral, in spite of Aunt Elsie's entreaty that she should stay. "It's good of you, Elsie," she said, with a shake of her head, "and I guess I could live with you as easy as I could with anybody; but I should miss him more here than I should anywhere else, and I'd rather be in my own place."

They let her go, but Aunt Elsie said the last word with affectionate earnestness, as she passed out at the door: "Don't be sick or in any kind of trouble without letting us know. I'll do for you there just as willingly as here if you should happen to need me."

Three days later Esther was gone too. She took a silent farewell of her grandfather's room, looked long from the windows at the hills she had come to love so much and stepped out of the family circle like a daughter of the house whose place no one else would ever quite fill. Stella went with her to the depot, and their hands unclasped reluctantly when the last moment came. There were thoughts which neither whispered to the other, and they wondered as they looked in each other's eyes whether the time would

ever come when they could fully tell them, but Esther understood best what the silence held.

It was that other day over again when she came home to her own, but the welcome lacked something of the boisterous gladness which had greeted Kate, and the mother's smile was full of tears as she clasped the girl in her arms. No one, not even Mrs. Northmore, understood exactly why she had given up the Boston plan. The grandfather's going away, in the fullness of his ripe old age, hardly seemed a reason why she should relinquish pleasures which had looked so bright, and an opportunity which had meant so much to her. However, they were all most heartily glad to have her at home again, especially Kate, and the latter felt a little foolish, remembering that morning at Aunt Katharine's, when it appeared from Esther's report that the old woman had not objected at all to her giving up the engagement which she had believed to be planned with such deep and deadly designs. Really, it seemed that she had lashed herself up to that affair and been disagreeable on quite gratuitous grounds. She admitted it, to herself, with her usual frankness, and thanked her stars, in a strictly private manner, that no one but Aunt Katharine and herself knew it, save Tom.

To Mrs. Northmore, watching Esther thoughtfully

by the steady light of mother-love, it seemed that the girl had found real value in the summer. She seemed somehow older, looking at things more quietly, and with a leisure from herself which, in spite of her ready sympathy for others, had too often been wanting in the past. It was an aid against the restlessness which might have come when a sudden vacancy in one of the Rushmore schools brought her at Christmas an unexpected offer of the position. She accepted it with her mother's quick consent, doing good work and enjoying it, as well as the pay that came with it. Indeed, as she carried home her check at the end of each month, she was impressed more than ever with the soundness of certain views of Aunt Katharine's on the moral value of earning and owning. She wrote to the latter repeatedly, and once Aunt Katharine replied; but she was not fond of her pen, and the letter, though affectionate, was brief.

There were longer letters from Stella, letters of the chatty, personal sort, with a generous sprinkling of family news. Mr. Hadley was calling often. If he had sustained any disappointment that the cousins were not in Boston together, he was apparently consoling himself with the company of the one who was left. They were going to art lectures and symphony concerts together, and the married sister had called.

"It's precisely what ought to happen," Esther said to herself more than once; and the smile in her eyes as she said it suggested that there was no vagueness in her mind as to what the happening should be. Sometimes when the smile was gone a wistful look came in its place, but if she had any regrets or longings of her own, she told them to no one.

The spring vacation in the schools came with the Easter, early that year. Esther laid plans valiantly at the outset for work to be accomplished in the space between terms, but she had grown thoroughly tired of her needle on the afternoon of the second day, when her father announced suddenly that he was going to drive out to the farm. There were matters connected with the spring planting to be talked over with Jake Erlock.

"What do you say to my going with you?" she exclaimed, dropping her work. "It's ever so long since I went out there, and I feel just like it."

There was nothing Dr. Northmore enjoyed more than having one of his daughters with him when he took a long drive." "That's a capital idea," he said. "Get your things on quick."

Spring was coming along the track of the wide straight road by which they took their way to the pretty uplands which were the doctor's pride and care.

Here and there broad fields of wheat were already showing a tender green from the springing of the grain which had lain all winter under frost and snow, and between them new-ploughed fields sent up a pleasant smell, the wholesome smell of the kindly earth turning itself again to the sun and the rain.

The little gray house, set back from the road, wore its old shy look, and the occupant, who greeted them as they drove up to the door, seemed like one who, in his solitary wintering, might have sat asleep on his hearth, coming out half timidly now to greet the warmth and stir of the world. He lost his air of uncertainty as he saw his callers, and welcomed them to his kitchen, which was orderly as ever, setting chairs for them about his fire with a bustling hospitality. Esther did not keep her place long. A few kindly inquiries, a polite listening to his report of the winter, and then she left the two men together, and slipped away for a stroll by herself through the orchard and along the edge of the field where the threshing had gone on so blithely in the summer past.

The straw-stack was there to remind of it still, not fair and golden now, but gray and weather-beaten from the winter storms. It had grown smaller with the passing months, and a great hollow had been

worn in its side by the browsing cattle. On the soft matted floor of this inner shelter lay two calves, one with its pretty, fawn-like head resting on the dark red neck of the other. They turned soft wondering eyes to the girl as she looked in upon them, and a sitting hen, so near the color of the straw that at first she did not see her, ruffled warningly from her nest in the side.

She did not disturb them in their quiet retreat, but sat down for a little while in the warm friendliness beside their open door, and thought half-dreamily of that day that was gone. What a bustle of work had filled the place! She could see the puffing engine sending up its quick black breath against the sky, and the great crimson machine, like a chariot, at its back, with Morton Elwell at the front, a charioteer holding the car of plenty on its way, amid a score of sunburnt outriders. How confident he had looked as he stood there in his workman's dress, bare-armed and bare-throated, how strong and steady!

She smiled at her own fancy. And then the rest of the picture faded, leaving the one figure alone; but it was not at the threshing she saw him now, it was at home, at school, on the playground, and everywhere her comrade, her champion, her friend. Had he been something more in those old days, and was

he still? Ah, if she could be sure of *that!* The letters had lost the old boyish freedom in these last months. She had complained once that Morton Elwell took too much for granted. He was taking nothing now.

Her father's voice calling from the house roused her at last from her revery, and they were off again for home. He was thinking too busily of his summer plans to talk, and she, wrapped in her own thoughts, was glad of the silence. But she broke it suddenly as they drew near the substantial brick house which belonged to the Elwells, almost at the end of the ride.

"Suppose you let me out here, father," she said. "I haven't been in to see Mrs. Elwell for weeks, and I've been thinking all the afternoon how good she was to us last summer at the threshing. I want to go in and thank her for it over again. I'll come home by myself in a little while."

She hesitated a moment whether or not to go in by the back way in the old familiar fashion, then, for some reason, walked to the front door and rang the bell. The mistress herself opened it, her hands a little floury, and a clean gingham apron over her afternoon dress.

"Well, upon my word!" she exclaimed, starting at

the sight of her caller. "If we weren't talking about you, Esther Northmore, this blessed minute! Come in, come in. Who do you think is here?"

She had not time to guess. She had not time to speak the name which rose with wondering incredulity to her lips when the owner of it himself came hurrying through the hall to meet her.

"You!" she cried, fairly springing to meet Morton Elwell. "Why, how does this happen?"

"It's vacation for me too," he said, beaming at her in the most radiant manner. "And — yes, I'll own it. It was a genuine fit of homesickness that brought me. I've been struggling with it all winter, but it was simply too much for me when there actually came a halt in the school work. I *had* to come. There was no other way."

"Think of it," said Mrs. Elwell, who looked so happy that there was almost a halo round her head; "think of his taking that journey and coming home for a week's vacation, when he could hardly afford a day off for us all last summer."

"It does seem as if I'd grown to be something of a spendthrift, doesn't it?" said the young man. "But you can't hold yourself down all the time. You have to break loose now and then. And let me tell you" — they had reached the sitting room now, and he was

sitting between them, looking from one to the other like a happy child — "let me tell you that I've taken the Lisper scholarship, and that means my tuition all the rest of my course. Don't you think I could afford to give myself a glimpse of home when I wanted it so desperately?"

They cried, "Oh!" in concert, Mrs. Elwell, whose ideas were a little vague in regard to scholarships, prolonging hers as if to cover the comments she ought to make, and Esther adding, with the color sweeping over her face, "Why, that is splendid, perfectly splendid! I can't tell you how glad I am."

"And won't you have to work your way any more?" asked Mrs. Elwell, when she could get her breath.

"Oh, yes. I shall have to turn an honest penny for myself now and then," said her nephew, smiling. "Tuition doesn't cover all the expenses by a good deal, but it's a big help. Why, I feel quite like a nabob."

The name, with its sudden reminder of the one to whom Tom Saxon had mockingly given it in the summer, made Esther laugh. Morton Elwell, with his brown hands and common suit of clothes, did not look the character in the least.

"Well, I'm glad you are *not* a nabob," she said, meeting his eyes, and then demurely dropping her

own. "Please don't go on to be one so fast that we can't keep up with you. There are some of us that like the old ways and have to go slow."

His face kindled, and he was on the point of saying something, when his aunt spoke. "Now you children just make yourselves at home," she said, rising, "and I'll go on and get the supper. I was just fixing to make some biscuits when you came, Esther. You'll stay to supper, of course."

"Oh, I must go home in a minute," said the girl. For the first time in her life she felt a sudden timidity in the thought of a *tête-à-tête* with Morton Elwell. "Mother'll expect me."

"Now what makes you talk like that?" said Mrs. Elwell, in an injured tone. "Doesn't she know where you are? Of course she won't expect you. She knows I wouldn't let you go home before supper. Why, you never used to do that way, and it's ever so long since you were here."

The logic was unanswerable, and Esther settled back in the chair from which she had half risen. "She'll stay, Aunt Jenny," said Morton, and he added, smiling at Esther, "weren't you just saying that some of us liked the old ways?"

She took refuge in them swiftly when they were left alone. He must tell her all about himself, about

college, what he had done to gain that scholarship, and what else he had done. She was all sympathy, all interest, with all the old responsiveness in her face, and he yielded himself to the warmth and joy of it as one yields to spring sunshine after the cold. She grew easier after the first, and presently there was no chance for embarrassment nor for confidences left; for the senior Elwell, with Morton's young cousins, came into the room, and then the talk grew general, though with Morton still at the centre, as was the newcomer's right, and indeed his necessity with Esther leading him on.

She was at her best — winsome, adroit, and determined if there was family pride in this uncle of his, it should bestir itself now. She had grown even prettier than she used to be, her manners even more charming, the young man said to himself, and the bounding happiness in her heart might well have made it true. For there had been a moment, just that moment before the others came into the room, when she had caught sure knowledge of the thing she had longed to know.

He had been telling her of an oratorical contest in which he had borne a part, and, with a sudden tenderness in his voice, had said, "I wished a hundred times, while I was preparing my speech, that I could go over

it with you. Do you remember how you always used to let me orate to you when I had anything on hand for the rhetoricals? It must have been an awful bore, but somehow I never felt as if I could go on the stage without your help."

"And you see you didn't need it after all," she said, looking away. "You won the medal without me."

"Oh, but it wasn't without you," he said, leaning toward her and speaking low, "for I was thinking all the time what you would say if I won."

Ah, he could not have said a word like that if some other girl had stolen her place away!

The talk was over at last, and the supper too, the good substantial supper which was always spread at the Elwells'. She could go now. There was no formality to insist that having eaten she must stay still longer, and she wanted Morton to herself. She was quite ready for it now, and he would go home with her of course.

They had come back, with all the new meaning of it for each, to the old frankness and freedom, and yet as they took the familiar path across the fields, in the gathering dusk, it was not easy to speak the thought that filled both their hearts. They talked for a little while of indifferent things — of the lengthening days, of the buds swelling on the willows, of the new buildings

rising on a neighbor's place. Then, all at once the moon, the friendly moon, so kind in all its wanderings to the needs of lovers, rose up in the sky. It was a new moon, and they saw it at the same moment over their right shoulders.

"We must wish a wish, as we used to when we were children," said Esther, gayly.

There could never be another moment like this. He stood suddenly still, and his eyes looked into hers. "Esther," he said, "it seems to me I have only one wish in the world, it is so much dearer than all the others. If I could know, if I could surely know—" and then he stopped. That swelling at his throat which had choked him once before mastered his voice again, not from fear now, but hope.

She waited an instant, then, as her hand slipped into his, whispered, "Do you mean me, Mort? Oh, *do* you mean me?"

It had never taken any one so long to cross that field as it did those two to cross the little space that was left. There was no bar to speech now, and there was so much to say! He said to her presently, with a note of perplexity in his voice, "Esther, I have never understood why you gave up going to Boston this winter. You certainly wanted very much to go at first."

"Things changed after grandfather died," she said.

She hesitated a moment, then took refuge in the formula she had used so often to the others, but with a clause she had not whispered before, as she added, "Somehow I knew there was nothing I really wanted except to come home — and have *you* come too."

He murmured something rapturous. But he was not quite satisfied yet. After a little he said, "Esther, do you remember telling me once that if you had half a chance you'd live a different life from the common workaday sort; you'd have culture, and leisure, and travel, and all those things? You did have a chance, didn't you?"

She flushed. "No one offered it to me," she said. "Perhaps no one ever would. At any rate — " her voice sounded nervous but happy — "if 'twas 'half a chance,' I ran away from the other half. I didn't want anything but you, Mort. I shall have whatever you have, and that's enough."

He threw back his head and drew a long breath. "Oh, I mean to do so much for you," he said. "It seems to me I can accomplish anything now."

There was the murmur of excited talking in the sitting room at the Northmores' when they opened the door at last. "Well, of all the strange things she ever did, I call that the strangest," the doctor was saying in the tone of one grappling with a mystery.

The two young people looked at each other wondering. Then Esther said, in a merry whisper, "He doesn't mean me. He'll think I've done the most sensible thing in the world."

They walked toward the room, and the next moment Kate was in the hall to meet them. She was quite pale, and an unusual excitement showed in her manner. Even the sight of Morton Elwell seemed hardly to divert her preoccupation. "We heard you had come, and I'm so glad," she said. Then, turning to her sister, she exclaimed: "Esther, the strangest thing you ever knew has happened. Aunt Katharine is dead. Mother got a letter just now."

"Dead!" repeated Esther. It did not cross her mind to wonder why they thought this thing so strange. The fact itself filled her with a great and sudden sadness. "Poor dear Aunt Katharine!" she said, and in the light of what the last hour had brought to herself the thought of all the brave old heart had missed, and how stanchly she had borne it, filled her with a new love and pity. "How did it happen?"

"She died suddenly," said Kate. "Aunt Elsie wrote about it. But it isn't that. It's her will! Oh, you can't think how she's left her money. It seems as if she couldn't have meant it."

An unmistakable alarm leaped into Esther Northmore's eyes, and she turned suddenly to Morton Elwell. "We were great friends," she whispered, in a low hurried tone, "but nothing, nothing could make any difference now."

Low as the words were spoken, Kate caught them. "Oh, you darlings! you darlings!" she cried, throwing an arm round the neck of each. Then, between laughing and crying, she said hysterically, "But it isn't *you*, Esther, that she's left her money to. It's *me!* Think of it, *me!*"

"You!" ejaculated Esther, dropping with a sudden limpness against Morton's shoulder. "Did she think —"

Kate pulled her toward the door. The preponderating note in her voice was laughter now. "Come and hear what she thinks."

Even Esther could not wait for the details of the letter after this. Aunt Katharine had gone suddenly, as she always hoped she might, but her will, which she had directed to be read at once upon her decease, was a far greater surprise to her relatives. After giving careful directions for her funeral, she had made her bequests. The document had been drawn up before her brother's death (by date in the early fall), and her farm, which joined his, had been left

to him, as a permanent part of the Saxon homestead. To certain persons, who had been in a way dependent on her kindness, she had left small sums, among them Solomon Ridgeway, to be used for his support and comfort, "at such times as he may see fit to be absent from his present residence." (So ran the wording.) To a certain charitable institution she had left five thousand dollars. To Esther Northmore, with her love, some personal belongings, and these, as the girl recognized with a throb at her heart, were those which she had valued most, and then followed this singular passage.

"As to the bulk of my property, it has sometimes crossed my mind that could I know some young woman intelligently devoted to the securing of those rights which I believe must be accorded to women before the conditions of society can become true and sane, and willing for the sake of these, and for the sake of her own independence, to refrain from marriage, that I would make such young woman my heir. Circumstances have, however, led me to doubt the probability of finding such a one, as well as the expediency of the measure. I, therefore, being in my right mind and of disposing memory, do give and bequeath the residue of my property, valued at thirty-five thousand dollars, to my grandniece and

namesake, Katharine Saxon Northmore, who, I believe, has will enough of her own to pursue whatever courses she may see fit, in spite of any man who might be bold enough to marry her. And to the gift I add this request, that she will take the trouble to look candidly into those views which I have maintained. I am confident that her sister Esther will not misstate them."

A minute of dead silence followed the reading. Then the doctor burst forth again: "The idea of leaving a legacy to anybody with a dig like that! Why couldn't she have been civil about it if she wanted to do it? Perhaps her notion was to scare the young men off and keep Kate single after all."

But Morton Elwell burst out laughing. "Not a bit of it," he said. "A fellow who didn't think he was mighty lucky to get Kate on any terms wouldn't deserve to have her, and the old lady knew it. Kate, I call this glorious!" and he caught her and whirled her around the room at a rate which left them both breathless.

"I'll tell you what 'tis, father," she began, with a gasp, when they had fairly stopped. "I don't intend to have the name without the game, and I mean to begin to use that money as I please, right away. We'll pay off that mortgage that has bothered you so, the very first thing."

"Nonsense," said the doctor; but she went on:—

"And maybe, when I get through the rest of my schooling, I'll take a course in medicine. I always thought I should like to be a doctor. Don't you think 'Northmore and Northmore' would look well over your office?"

"Nonsense," he said again, this time more sternly. But he had been known to say "nonsense" before to some plans which his girls carried out.

And after a while — "How far do thirty-five thousand dollars go? I *might* do something handsome by Mort and Esther," she added, sending a sly look at the two young people.

Their sudden blushes told the rest of the story.

"Well, well!" said the doctor, laying down the paper, "how things are heaping up to-night!" He sent a glance at his wife, and the look in her eyes made his own grow moist. "My dear," he said, "this is a pretty good world of ours, after all. I don't pretend to understand what the cranks are driving at, but I rather think there are some of the old ways that'll keep it sweet yet."

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